

JAN.

THE LEADING
WESTERN MAGAZINE

15¢ DIME

WESTERN

MAGAZINE



**"TOO DAMN
MANY
NEIGHBORS!"**
by **WALT COBURN**
BONHAM • VAN CORT



For once they actually agree!



Hope and Crosby, in the movies, seldom see eye to eye.

But there's one thing they really do agree on —they both think U.S. Savings Bonds make wonderful Christmas gifts!

SAYS BOB: "They're swell for *anybody* on your list. You couldn't pick a nicer, more sensible, more welcome present. Even Crosby knows that."

SAYS BING: "I hate to admit it, folks, but Hope is right. And remember this—you can buy Bonds at any bank or post office in the U. S. A."

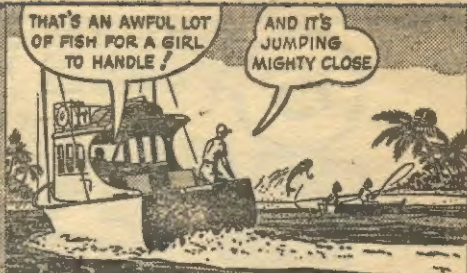
BOB AND BING (together): "This Christmas, why not give the finest gift of all—U.S. Savings Bonds!"

Give the finest gift of all ... U.S. SAVINGS BONDS

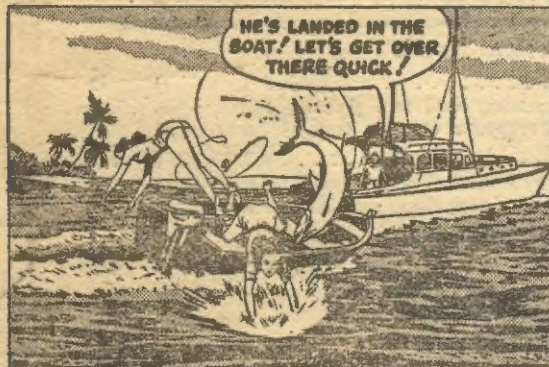
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LEAPING TARPON STARTS THINGS MOVING



JERRY CANNON AND HIS BROTHER KIP ARE RETURNING TO PORT FROM A LONG DAY OF TROLLING FOR SAILFISH IN THE GULF STREAM. WHEN . . .



HE'S LANDED IN THE BOAT! LET'S GET OVER THERE QUICK!



HE'S FOULED THE LINE AROUND YOUR MOTOR. WE'D BETTER TOW YOU IN



THAT'S OUR PIER
RESTING QUIETLY
SHE'S A KNOCKOUT

HOW'S MY FISH?



PICTURES? TAKE KIP HERE, BUT LEAVE ME OUT. I LOOK LIKE "BLACKBEARD THE PIRATE"

WHY NOT CLEAN UP IN THE CLUBHOUSE WHILE I GET MY CAMERA



SAY, THIS BLADE'S A HONEY. I'VE NEVER ENJOYED A QUICKER, SMOOTHER SHAVE

LOTS OF OUR MEMBERS USE THIN GILLETTES. THEY'RE REALLY KEEN



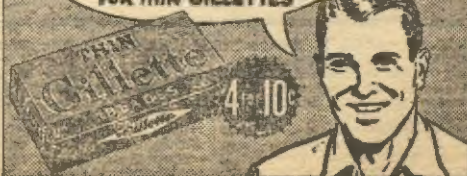
NEXT TIME YOU AND HELEN WANT TO GO TARPON FISHING, MY BOAT'S AT YOUR DISPOSAL

THAT'S A BARGAIN!

H-M-M-TALL, DARK AND HANDSOME!



MEN, THIN GILLETTES HAND OUT SHAVES THAT ARE CLEAN, COMFORTABLE AND GOOD-LOOKING. AMONG ALL LOW-PRICED BLADES, THEY'RE THE KEENEST AND LONGEST LASTING. THIN GILLETTES ARE MADE TO FIT YOUR GILLETTE RAZOR PRECISELY, TOO. THAT MEANS YOU ARE PROTECTED AGAINST SCRAPING AND IRRITATION. ALWAYS ASK FOR THIN GILLETTES



15¢ DIME ALL STORIES COMPLETE WESTERN MAGAZINE

FEBRUARY ISSUE PUBLISHED JANUARY 21

VOLUME LI

JANUARY, 1948

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ALL STORIES NEW



NO REPRINTS

Published monthly by Popular Publications, Inc., at 2256 Grove Street, Chicago, 16, Illinois. Editorial and Executive Offices, 20 East 42nd Street, New York, 17, N. Y. Henry Seeger, President and Secretary. Harold S. Goldsmith, Vice-President and Treasurer. Entered as second-class matter November 30, 1935, at the Post Office, at Chicago, Illinois, under the Act of March 3, 1879. Copyright, 1947, by Popular Publications, Inc. This issue is published simultaneously in the Dominion of Canada. Copyright under International Copyright Convention and Pan American Copyright Conventions. All rights reserved, including the right of reproduction, in whole or in part, in any form. Single copy, 15c. Annual subscription in U.S.A., its possessions and Canada, \$1.50; other countries 50c additional. Send subscriptions to 205 East 42nd Street, New York, 17, N. Y. For advertising rates, address Sam J. Perry, 205 East 42nd Street, New York, 17, N. Y. When submitting manuscripts, enclose stamped, self-addressed envelope for their return, if found unavailable. The publishers will exercise care in the handling of unsolicited manuscripts, but assume no responsibility for their return. Any resemblance between any character, appearing in fictional matter, and any person, living or dead, is entirely coincidental and unintentional. Printed in the U.S.A.



IN THE SADDLE

SHORTLY before the curtain went up on the final performance of a traveling show in Virginia City, a miner, waving a shotgun, crashed through the opera house's stage door. Bellowing oaths heard all over the house he kicked open the door of one dressing room after another.

"Where's that so-and-so leadin' man of this here troupe?" the miner demanded. "I aim to shoot th' dirty dog on th' spot!"

The young leading man had more than an inkling of why the miner was seeking him. He was half way out the window when the miner blew into the room.

"Stop where y'are!" commanded the miner, bringing up his shotgun. "So, you aim to take my wife away when you leave town tonight?"

The actor squeaked, "Please, please don't shoot me! I didn't know she was your wife. Surely there must be some way to settle this!"

The miner relaxed. "Wa-al," he said, "mebbe so there is a way to square it, without my shootin' you."

"Oh, sir," the actor gulped, "just name it."

The miner thought it over. Then: "Would two passes to th' show be askin' too much?"

Miner Hoc Vincent doesn't crop up again in western history. However, the name of the lady—Hoc's wife—who ran away with the actor after her husband had accepted two theater tickets to look the other way, does appear again. Sally Vincent later married Henry T. P. Comstock.

Old Pancake Comstock—so nicknamed because he always claimed he was too busy to bake bread, so used all of his flour to make pancakes, instead—did not discover the famous lode that bore his name. He owned a large interest in it, but it was through his bragging that people of his time thought he was the discoverer.

After the strike was made, Pancake spent much time around the mine. He had always fancied himself as a great ladies man, and he tried to charm every woman visitor to the diggings into marrying him. He presented each woman visiting the Comstock with a pan full of the rich dirt. These pans were worth about \$150.

One day, as Comstock was going to his cabin, he saw a skinny little man, obviously a greenhorn, leading two lean nags pulling a prairie schooner up the dusty street. He also saw, in the wagon, a woman. Sally Vincent!

Comstock noted that both man and woman

looked ragged and hungry. Pancake worked fast. He gave the small man a job in the mine and, within a few days, had talked Sally into running away with him. She agreed, after making sure he was as wealthy as he claimed. Sally had learned her lesson. She had deserted the actor when he went broke, and had married the greenhorn before she knew he was just a poor wanderer.

One day, while the husband was hard at work, Pancake and Sally went to Washoe Valley and got married. They overlooked the technicality of the other husband. They went to Carson on a honeymoon.

It was on the second day of the honeymoon that Carter, the husband, caught up to them. Small as he was, he looked very big to Sally and Pancake with a pistol in his hand.

Comstock, always a good talker, outdid himself. He talked Carter into putting his gun away.

"Let's settle this thing like gents," said Comstock. "I love Sally."

"I love her, too," said Carter.

"Just how much does she mean to you?"

Carter was not averse to making a deal. It was soon completed to the satisfaction of all. Once again Sally became a bartered bride. Carter accepted one revolver, one horse and sixty dollars, in cash, to quit his claim on Sally.

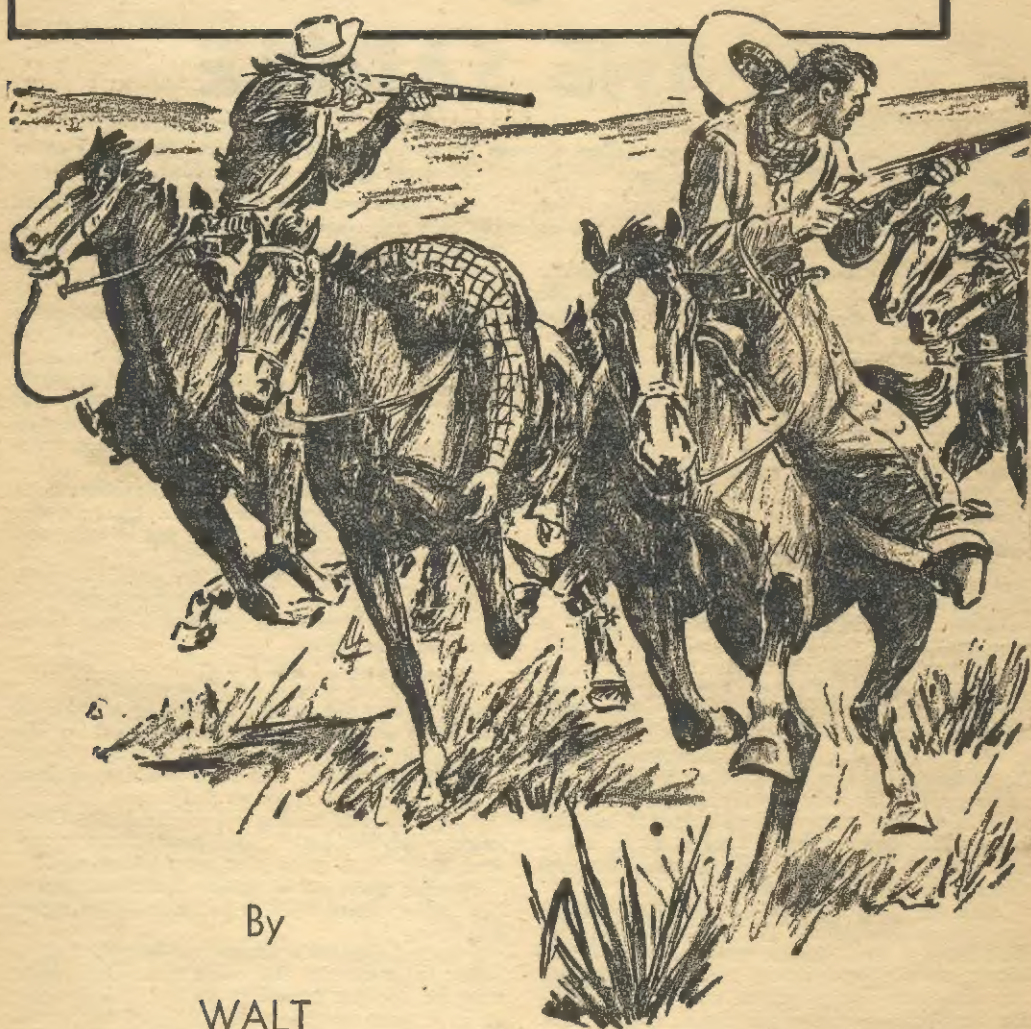
As Carter was bowing out of the room, Comstock called him back. "One more thing," Comstock said. "You gotta give me a bill-of-sale."

Pancake made out a regular bill-of-sale form and Carter signed it—just to make things legal-like.

Despite Comstock's wealth and imagined good looks, Sally did not stay with him. One night, when he was out gambling, he had locked Sally up in a room on the second floor of the hotel. (He had soon found out it was necessary to take this precaution.) But love merely laughed. A whiskey drummer from San Francisco bribed the hotel clerk into letting him use a pass key to Sally's quarters. When Pancake returned, Sally was gone.

—John T. Lynch

"TOO DAMN' MANY NEIGHBORS!"



By
WALT
COBURN

Fargo died in the saddle

The Colonel stared at the man who toted a Bible in one hand and a gun in the other. "I'm Sam Barbee, from Texas," the Colonel snarled. "This is the end of my trail, and I'm fixin' to shoot you down, if you don't stop your whinin'! Now, take yourself and your three yellow-bellied sons, and get to hell far away. Because you only got me outnumbered two to one."



CHAPTER ONE

Black Guns and Yellow Guts

THERE was enough cow-country in the Big Sag to hold the Bradded H, Barbed B outfits and six nester spreads, but nevertheless a range war was clouding the Montana sky—and it could turn into a bad 'un.

There was no denying that Preacher Hawker was the first man to locate the Big Sag and settle there with his shrewish wife, pretty young red-headed daughter and his three sons. He'd used his pacifist Bible to pass himself and his family through both Confederate and Union lines; he'd heaped his hellfire and damnation on the Damnyankees while he whined his passage through the Confederate camps. He'd used the same brimstone rantings to eternally condemn "them slave-drivin', high-chinned Rebs" when stopped by Union troops. Hawker had traveled with a horse pistol to balance the weight of the Bible in the pockets of his rusty black swallow-tail coat.

Even now, after he'd settled in the Upper Sag, Mark Hawker passed himself off as a sky-pilot who had been a circuit rider in Kansas and Missouri. But even his wife branded the lanky raw-boned man for what he was: a yellow-bellied Jayhawker. The woman further claimed the Bible and swallow-tailed coat had rightfully belonged to her own preacher father. His dying request had been to be buried in the coat, his Bible in his hands. Mark Hawker was a whiskey-guzzling, tobacco-chewing coward and thief. He was lowdown enough, the woman said, to steal the Bible and black

cloth of a dying man's calling from him at the grave. But she stuck with Mark and her strong hands kept the purse strings tightened. It was her greed that goaded her husband on when he would have hidden out somewhere back yonder. But, regardless of how he got there, Hawker was the first settler in the Big Sag. He claimed it all as far as a man could ride a stout horse between sunrise and sunset of a long Montana day.

Claiming the Big Sag was one thing. Holding onto it all was something different. Hawker didn't know the Texans were there until they'd been around a week.

Sam Barbee and his six-foot son Lee pointed their trail herd into the Lower Sag and spilled three thousand head of Texas longhorns on good feed and plenty water. The cattle were all in the Barbee road iron and branded Barbed B.

Sam Barbee was a tall lean man with gray hair and a drooping mustache. He had the eyes of an Indian. Lee, in his twenties, was the image of his father. With them was a hand-picked crew of Texas cowhands.

Sam and Lee watched Preacher Hawker and his three sons come riding down the Big Sag.

"Like they're bein' chased by the Comanches," Lee grinned.

"Or ten jumps ahead of the law," Barbee said. "What you make of 'em, son?"

"That 'un in the lead—the feller with the black coat tails a-poppin'—he flaps his wings like a buzzard. Them three a-follerin' set a horse heavy. Break a pony's back down across the kidneys. A saddlesore outfit, Colonel. . . ."

"Mebbyso," Sam Barbee mused aloud, and came almost setting himself up right there and now as some sort of a prophet, "if we was to stop them four jaspers in their tracks, then mebbysso we'd put a quick halt to somethin' akin to that fence cutters' war we left behind us in Texas."

Barbee, cowman, and colonel only by grim courtesy and leadership displayed in the fence cutters' war, had his saddle carbine out of its old scabbard and across his lean belly as he sat his horse. His eyes were hard but he grinned faintly. He liked the way his son sized a man up by the way he sat a horse. It proved he'd raised Lee right; raised him to think only as a

cowman thinks—in terms of horses and cattle.

Hawker rode a long stirrup. He looked as ungainly a-horseback as he did afoot when he stood to his six feet five. His hair and beard were drab-colored. His eyes were a pale greenish gray, and shifty. He wore a cartridge belt and six-shooter. And he packed his Bible to fall back on if the play called for it.

His sons flanked him: sandy-haired Oren; yellow-haired Beal; Yak, whose hair was almost albino. They were tough in looks and behavior but tainted inside with their sire's cowardice. They were armed with saddle guns and six-shooters.

"You ever see such big things?" the colonel drawled. "Where they come from they shore breed 'em fer big bone."

"Even a sorry shot," Lee grinned, sliding his saddle gun from its scabbard, "couldn't miss one of them things."

But the colonel said for Lee not to get itchy. "After all, son, we're strangers in a strange land. Behooves us to check the bet."

"Reckon they're natives, Colonel?"

"This Montana country's too young yet to have that much age on its native stock," Barbee said.

"We're gittin' our first sight of that Preacher Jayhawker outfit we heard about back along the trail," Barbee's son said.

"Preacher Hawker?"

"Preacher Jayhawker."

Sam and Lee let the Hawkers ride up.

Hawker broke the silence. "What's the meanin' of this invasion?" He stank of his own moonshine whiskey. He spat tobacco juice at the ground between them.

"Invasion?" Sam Barbee drawled.

"This is the Big Sag. It's mine. You got till sundown tomorrow to move your trail herd along."

"I'm Sam Barbee from Texas. This is my son Lee. This is the end of our cattle trail. This is big cow-country; plenty big enough for two cow outfits. We're locatin' here in the Lower Sag. Stay to your Upper Sag and we'll git along plenty peaceful. We shoved some of your cattle back already. You own the Bradded H iron?"

"The Bradded H is my brand."

"Then step down." Sam Barbee swung from his saddle, at the same time shoving the carbine deftly into its scabbard.

THE Hawkers eyed the grizzled Texan. Sam squatted on his spurred bootheels and with his left hand smoothed the bare ground. He looked up from under his slanted hatbrim at the preacher who sat his sweat-marked horse uneasily.

"Git down, man," Sam Barbee drawled. "There's no dawg to bite you."

"Don't try none of your damn Texican tricks. We got you outnumbered."

"Texan." Sam Barbee said. "And it's a little first reader lesson about brands. And I don't know what you mean about havin' a Texan outnumbered."

Barbee opened the long blade of his jackknife, broke a twig from a bush beside the trail and whittled its end sharp. Then, without looking up to see whether or not Hawker was watching, Barbee drew the big Bradded H brand.

"There's your Bradded H. Now watch how easy it is to work your Bradded H into my Barbed brand . . . blotch it just a leetle bit to take care of the brads on the right and there she is!"

Then, while Preacher Hawker and his sons stared, Sam erased the worked brand and was up on his feet. In place of the open jackknife there was a six-shooter in his hand.

Hawker still sat his horse. The gun was pointed at his belly. Sam grinned. "That's how it kin turn out to be," he said, "if you take a notion to shove your Bradded H cattle into the Lower Sag. But, like I said, it's a Big Sag, big enough to hold both outfits. We're located in the Lower Sag. Now why don't you just take them three big things you fetched here and ride back and call it a deal? Or if you figger you got me'n Lee outnumbered—"

"You're threatenin' the life of a preacher of Gawdamighty's gospel, pointin' your pistol at a man of the cloth."

"I'm goin' to gut-shoot a damn' black-leg skalawag and scoun'rel, if he don't stop his snivelin'. Take them three big whelps of yourn an' hightail it back to Upper Sag, and stay there, you damn' Jayhawker! Now git' movin' . . ."

Preacher Hawker stared at the gun. His sons saw the gun Lee was holding so carelessly. They reined their horses and rode away.

"The bigger they come, Colonel, the more dust they kick up behind a coyote get-

away." Lee shoved his six-shooter back into its holster.

"I'd be more satisfied if they had the guts to fight. Never be scared of a brave man, regardless of his toughness. But when they back down and coyote a-snarlin' with their bushy tails between their hind laigs, watch out of a moonlight night along a brushy trail. Now let's butcher one of them fat 'uns in the Bradded H iron. Ourn is trail-ga'nt and we're outa meat."

That was how the Barbee Barbed B outfit moved into the Lower Sag—and stayed. There was nothing much the Hawkers could do about it.

They didn't dare try a bushwhacker killing, for fear of swift reprisal. And after his own craven fashion Preacher Mark Hawker made the best of it. He said that Barbee was plumb right. The Big Sag was large enough cow-country to hold both outfits.

Hawker's greedy wife was of a different opinion. She voiced her thoughts in no uncertain terms. She was tall and handsome, without a thread of silver in her hair. She could do a man's work around a ranch and while the log buildings were being erected she worked side by side with her husband and sons and did the cooking to boot. She was raising her daughter, Hannah, to be a lily-fingered lady. Her schemings for more land, cattle and money were a part of her fierce mother-love for her red-haired daughter.

"You'll never make the mistake I made when I married Hawker," she repeated countless times in the hearing of them all. "Though he was a strapping, handsome man then and the best trader in Kansas and Missouri. The slickest mule-trader, and auctioneer, and a slave dealer on the side, for all his abolitionist talk. He traded in as many slaves as he did mules—to the tune of John Brown's body lies a moulderin' in the grave. I've got that slave money put away where Hawker and his whelps will never lay hands on it. It'll be yours and it'll buy the richest politician in Montana Territory when I find the man that's fit for you. Take care of your hands!"

Hannah was pampered, petted and dressed in the silk, satin and velvet her mother made into dresses. Her thick copy-perry hair was brushed night and morning. One hundred strokes, her mother doing the brushing. All Hannah had to do was count

the strokes. Hannah Hawker, still in her teens, was being groomed for ladyhood.

"Enough to make a man puke," Oren, Beal and Yak agreed.

They hated their mother, held their father in contempt and blamed him for their own cowardice. And they stuck together. They were tough and cruel; sometimes, when they got drunk enough, the triplets were dangerous.

But they had sense enough to follow the Preacher. They listened and understood his way of craven reasoning because they were of his flesh and blood.

A COWTOWN had come into existence in Big Sag, where the old freighter road crossed its middle. At first the place was no more than a stage station. Then a saloon. And from that beginning grew the tough cowtown of Big Sag, Montana. It had six saloons, a feed and livery barn, a general mercantile store, a barbershop and restaurant, a small hotel and a honkytonk dancehall. Big Sag was as tough as the men who squandered money to support it. Cowpunchers, prospectors, trappers, plainsmen in fringed buckskins, adventurers, renegades, outlaws and road agents, Big Sag was host to them all.

It was in town that Preacher Hawker and his sons met Sam Barbee and Lee. The Preacher, with a forced grin that was reflected on the faces of his sons, offered his big hand to the Texan.

"You was right. The Big Sag kin hold us all in peace."

When the news reached both outfits that there were small nester outfits commencing to fringe on the Upper and Lower Sag, Hawker tried to get Barbee to pool the two outfits and run the nesters out. Rustlers, Hawker called these outfits.

"The Bradded H and the Barbed B outfits," said Hawker, "has got to stick together. Them rustlers will steal us blind, Colonel."

"Only my son, Lee," Sam Barbee said, "and my Barb' B cowhands is allowed to call me colonel. And you better go easy on that war talk. Say nothin' till them fellers proves it one way or anther. If they're honest ranchers, don't begrudge 'em an occasional mav'rick. And if they git to whittlin' on my Barb' B cattle I'll handle that without my Jayhawker help. Any-

thing you and them sons of yourn start against them nesters, I'll stand back and allow you to finish without any kind of interference. I left one range war behind me. All I want now, here in Montana, is peace. Even if I have to fight for it."

That talk was at the bar in the First and Last Chance Saloon. The joint was owned, it was rumored, by the Hawkers. Owned, the bolder talk claimed, by Hawker's wife and managed by a gambling man called Chan Bartholomew. The tinhorn was said to be the cousin of Hawker's wife. Cousin or nephew, Bartholomew was cold-blooded as a snake.

It was the Preacher's wife who told Hawker what to say to Sam Barbee. When he reported his failure, she told him he was as brainless as he was cowardly. That he should take the first steamboat back down the Missouri from Fort Benton and take his whelps along.

"I knew you'd quit like a whipped cur," she finished. "That's why I sent for Chan."

"And you used my hard-earned money," Hawker whined, "to buy Bartholomew outa prison. That convict cousin of yourn should be a big help. That crook will steal all you got misered away—including that la-de-da lazy daughter."

She slapped him hard across the mouth, her eyes as wild as a she-cougar's.

"Raise your big whelps, I'll raise my daughter. Chan has sent for some men who will take their orders from me. They'll be the Bradded H cowhands. They'll run the Barbee outfit plumb back to Texas—or hang 'em to the cottonwoods in the Lower Sag."

"What in the name of hell are you and Bartholomew up to, woman?"

"I'm getting the Big Sag back," the woman said. "All of it. And it'll be well stocked with cattle. Cattle in the Barbed B iron, cattle in those nester brands. You didn't have the guts to hang onto Big Sag. You've lost Lower Sag without even putting up a fight. You're letting a bunch of two-bit rustlers camp on the rim and take what they want. You and your cowardly whelps, letting those Texans kick you around. I'll show you how to ramrod a cow outfit—the toughest outfit that ever hit this country. Bartholomew knows where to get his crew."

Hawker would have killed his wife then

and there if he'd had the guts. But he was scared of her. She had put the fear in him. And he recoiled from her now.

It was only later, when he'd backed out of the ranchhouse, gotten his horse and ridden away with his sons, that he remembered something he had wanted to tell her. He had seen Hannah riding across Big Sag with a man—Lee Barbee.

It wasn't the first time he'd sighted Hannah and Lee together near Big Sag town, where Hannah sometimes went alone. Where, perhaps, young Barbee rode to meet her.

Hawker laughed. He'd go back and bust that news about Hannah and Barbee being lovers. Bust it like a hickory wagon spoke across that handsome blonde head of hers. She'd go plumb wild when she heard the daughter she was miserin' for was slippin' off to meet that cattle-thievin' gun-slinger from Texas. Lee Barbee for a lover, after all this pamperin' an' perfumin' and sashay powderin' till Hannah stunk like a honky-tonk wench. That news would be like touchin' off a powder keg. It would blow the old lady to hell and gone, by hell-amighty!

"What you laughin' an' slappin' your laig about, pa?" asked one of the triplets.

"Just thought uh somethin' that'd make the cattle queen sick like she was poisoned. It's a gutshot. After that I kin die happy. I just had a mind to ride back an' tell her, but the sign ain't right. The queen could put a stop to it right now, but in a month, or six months. . . ." Preacher Hawker grinned and spat tobacco juice.

CHAPTER TWO

Marked Cards for a Range Princess

PREACHER HAWKER'S wife's maiden name had been Sarah Bartholomew. As a girl she'd had too much religion preached at her by a circuit rider father. She was fifteen when she ran away from home while her old man was gone on one of his rambling Bible-shouting pilgrimages. Sarah was gone a week before her mother missed her. She'd gotten a job singing at a third-rate St. Louis honkytonk when Mark Hawker found and married her. And never a day was marked off the calendar that she did not regret the marriage. She voiced her thoughts-only to Hannah. She vowed that

Hannah should have everything in life that she had been cheated of by that whining mule-trader.

"I'll make you the finest princess in the land," she told the girl. "The richest, biggest politician in the country will go down on his knees to worship your beauty."

"You read too many of those paperbacked love novels, ma."

For a moment Sarah's eyes blazed. She gripped the handle of the hair brush as though she had hold of a weapon. Anybody but her daughter Hannah would have been struck.

But struck, Hannah would have struck back, though her eyes were softened now by dreams. She was only half listening to that oft-repeated story of bitterness and frustration. Occasionally she thought of some suitor, like the slick adventurer Chan Bartholomew. Cousin Chan, who was anything but cousinly in his speech and polished manners.

But Hannah's dreams were not concerned too greatly with Chan Bartholomew, even though the gambler had a part in her scheme to escape Bradded H ranch for a trip to town. Hannah was thinking of Lee Barbee.

The hair brush in Sarah's hand swept down the thick length of coppery hair so vigorously that it yanked Hannah from her dreams. She winced, said "Ouch!" and got to her feet.

"If I'm driving to town to collect that money from Cousin Chan, I'd better be going, ma," Hannah said.

"Quit calling me ma. It's vulgar."

"I'm sorry, mother."

Hannah had something of her mother's cunning. She'd wear no silks or velvets for the trip to town. Not even the dark green riding habit. She'd wear the shabby divided leather skirt, fawnskin blouse and ride astride like a cowboy.

Because, she convinced her mother, men didn't pay her much attention if she dressed shabbily and went a-horseback across country, away from the more frequented trails. She could fetch back the money from Chan Bartholomew's First and Last Chance in her saddle pockets. That's how she explained the deal to Sarah.

Hannah hoped her mother wouldn't see through her. Not because she feared punishment; Hannah was afraid of nothing.

But she dreaded hurting the woman who was sacrificing everything and everybody in her fantastic attempt to give her the world in a basket. Hannah knew if she failed her mother, the woman would suffer terribly. It might kill her. Then, too, Sarah might easily twist her insane worship into something terrible. Sadie Bartholomew Hawker might kill her own daughter rather than let her marry a man like Lee Barbee. If ever Sarah suspected Hannah was using these weekly visits to town as an excuse to meet Barbee . . . Hannah shuddered.

"I've got to be careful," Hannah told herself. When she met Lee she repeated that warning. "We've got to be more careful, Lee. If ever my mother finds this out—"

"How long do you reckon I'm goin' to stand for all this coyotin' around, Hannah?" Lee clipped. "Hell, I'm a man. I want to marry you. I want this whole Big Sag to know it. You're mother's got to find out some time. She might as well be told now as fu'ther up the crick. I'll ride home with you and tell her!"

"No, No, Lee!"

When she put her arms around his neck her mother's letter to Chan Bartholomew slid from the pocket of her fawnskin blouse.

Barbee picked it up and saw the gambler's name on it. Unreasoning jealousy gripped him. "What's this letter you're writin' to that slick-haired, lilly-fingered tinhorn?" Barbee snapped.

"That's my mother's handwriting, Lee. It's a . . . a business letter."

"Stinkin' of that purty perfume she washes you in of a Saturday night? How do I know it ain't a love letter you wrote an'—"

"Open it, then."

Barbee carefully opened the envelope flap. And though he could tell from the first line that it was no love letter, he kept on reading, to its last word. Then he folded its pages and put the letter back into the envelope. There was a grim set to his lean jaw and his black eyes were flinty.

"Don't let Bartholomew know I got a look at this," he said quietly.

"What's the matter, Lee?"

"Texas darkies have a sayin' for it: Somebody just walked acrost my grave. I reckon it was the cattle queen."

"Don't look at me like that, Lee . . . like you hated me!"

Lee grinned and took her in his arms and his kiss bruised her lips. His eyes were cold, hard and black when he let her go.

"Deliver that letter to Bartholomew. If you know what's in it, then you've shore played Barbee for a sucker. If you don't know what the cattle queen wrote Bartholomew, then read it and play your cards accordin'. Me and the colonel will be playin' what we got for aces."

Barbee left her there and rode into the early dusk headed down the Lower Sag towards the Barbed B home ranch.

HANNAH stared after Lee until he and his horse disappeared in the twilight. Then she read the letter to Bartholomew. When she finished she stood there, the color drained from her face. Her mother, self-styled cattle queen, was planning wholesale murder. She planned to kill off Colonel Barbee and Lee. When the Barbed B outfit had been wiped out she would move against the nesters. She was fixing for range war, using Bartholomew to ramrod the drive that would give her Big Sag.

As for Preacher Hawker and his sons, the cattle queen had written, they're too cowardly to be dealt in on this. But if they get in the way, don't hesitate to ride them under. Nothing, nobody, you understand, is to stop us. I am depending on you, Chan. Fail me and I'll hang you with your own rope.

For the first time in her life Hannah knew the stark meaning of fear. She needed Lee, right now; needed the protection of his arms and the sound of his soft Texan voice. But Barbee had left her standing here alone under the giant cottonwood where they had first met—where they had found love together. Now he had left her to work out her own salvation according to her own lights. It seemed to the girl it was the cruelest thing a man could do to the woman he loved and who loved him.

"I hate you." Hannah's voice had a lifeless sound in her own ears. "I hate you, Lee Barbee!"

She mounted her black-and-white paint horse and rode on to town. The lights of the little cowtown were on. She did what she had never before done—rode straight

to the hitchrack in front of the First and Last Chance, instead of first stabling the horse that had packed her here. And for the first time she did not slip in through the private rear door unseen, unnoticed.

Hannah Hawker went boldly in through the front swinging half-doors, regardless of stares and drunken grins. She moved down the length of the long bar and men turned and stared. She walked past the gambling tables, skirted the dance floor below the level of the curtained stage while painted, hard-eyed percentage girls looked her over.

One of the girls stopped her. "Looking for a job, dearie?"

"Not exactly. My mother owns the place."

"The Queen? You don't look like what I thought. You're a clean-lookin' kid and you smell of sagebrush. Get out, and stay out of this stinkin' place. Stay away from Bartholomew—he's rank poison—and he's my man. I wouldn't trust him out of my sight. I hate his guts but he's mine, so stay away from him."

"What's your name?" Hannah asked quietly.

"Goldie—to the customers."

"I'm not a customer."

"It's still Goldie. I'm in charge of the gals here. I should call the bouncer and have you tossed out the back door."

"Thanks, Goldie. If I ever fall heir to this saloon I'll give it to you for your birthday."

"Thanks, Princess."

"The name is Hannah." She held out her hand but she wasn't smiling.

The girl with the natural golden hair and wise dark eyes reached out and took it. "You meant that, didn't you, Hannah?"

"I meant it, Goldie."

"The name is Grace Bartholomew. It's on the marriage certificate that dates back before Chan went to the pen. That's all he left me when he was sent up. It's all I've got now. But it's better than a gun to hold that crooked tinhorn up for a wife's percentage. Chan is poison, but I said that before, didn't I?"

"This is strictly business, Grace, for my mother."

"Then it's bad business. Ugly as sin. Go marry that Lee Barbee and make him take you away from Big Sag. The colonel will hold 'em back if anybody tries to follow

you—never mind how I know. A gal around here picks up the latest, and if she's got any sense she keeps her mouth shut and her nose clean. Which rule number one I'm bustin' now!"

"If ever you need me, Grace. . . ."

"That goes double, Hannah, and good luck. Don't ever let that Lee cowboy down. He'll go through hell for you. And if he stays in the Big Sag, that's what he'll be doing. Take a good look at the gent that Chan has in his office and pass his description on to Barbee. Lee will tell the colonel. It might save trouble if they knew what he looked like and beat him to the draw. His name is Fargo."

She had lowered her voice to a barely audible tone. Hannah nodded and went on.

CHAN BARTHOLOMEW always kept his private office door shut and locked. Hannah halted there. From inside came the sound of a man's voice.

"... so get your job done, Fargo, before you talk payoff. And lay off the booze. Sober, you're the man for the job. Drunk, you're not worth a Confederate shinplaster. Now get out. Don't come back till you get your job done."

Hannah rapped sharply and the door opened quickly. A gun was pointed at her. Then Bartholomew recognized her and the short-barreled belly-gun in his hand slid out of sight under his tailored salt-and-pepper coat.

Bartholomew was a tall, handsome man, his olive skin barbered, his yellow hair sleek. He wasn't glad to see Hannah. He might have dismissed her with some excuse. But she walked past him and into his office—and looked into the coldest pair of male eyes she'd ever seen.

Under black brows that met above a hawk-beaked nose, those eyes were merciless. Fargo's skin was pockmarked. An old knife scar ridged bone white along one cheek. He smiled, a thin-lipped, cruel smile. The kind of smile he would give a man he had just shot.

"Who," he asked, "is the lady, Chan?"

"I'm Hannah Hawker. My father is Preacher Hawker. Who are you?" She smiled, forcing her eyes to meet his.

"I'm called Fargo," the gunman said quietly.

"Get out, Fargo." Chan Bartholomew was standing behind Hannah. She couldn't see but she knew Chan had that short-barreled pistol in his hand.

"We'll meet again, Hannah." Fargo bowed stiffly and lifted his Stetson hat. His hair was coarse, straight and black, with a streak of white across the top.

Then he went out, his silver-mounted spurs jingling mockingly. He was dressed like a range dude, the legs of his pants inside his boot tops. He wore two ivory-handled six-shooters in open, tied-down holsters. The door closed and Bartholomew leaned against it, a smile on his handsome face. He slid the belly-gun into the armpit holster under his double-breasted coat.

"Fargo," he said, "is a dangerous man. I'm sorry you ran into him. He thinks he's a lady-killer . . . as well as a man-killer."

"He looks dangerous," the girl said . . . "and interesting."

"Sometimes you talk like your mother." Bartholomew scowled.

"Is that supposed to be a compliment, Chan?"

"Depends. Business before pleasure. And even a few minutes' talk with you is my only pleasure. What news does Sarah send?"

Hannah took the re-sealed letter from her pocket. While his eyes were looking boldly into hers, she tore, with pretended nervousness, at the envelope. Then she laughed shakily and held letter and torn envelope out to him.

"See what you've made me do! You shouldn't stare at me like that, Cousin Chan, like you wanted to make love to me. . . ." She blushed.

Bartholomew laughed softly and took her hand, along with the letter, and would have put his arms around her but she slid away.

"I'm crazy about you, Hannah," the gambler said huskily. "All the reward I want from Sarah is you. I want you to be my wife, Hannah."

"Sarah," Hannah smiled, "has other plans for her princess. Better read her letter. If there's an answer, I'll have to get back with it or she'll be impatient."

Hannah knew how to handle men. Her mother had schooled her well. She sat on a corner of the flat-topped desk and watched him rip away the torn envelope and throw it aside.

Hannah drew a breath of relief. Her trick had worked. Bartholomew didn't suspect the envelope had been opened and the letter read.

A faint smile played around the edge of his mouth as he read.

"Just tell her," Bartholomew said, "that the game is about to commence. She'll understand. I don't believe in putting things in writing." He touched a lighted match to the letter and held it until its contents were ashes. Carelessly Hannah picked up the envelope and burned it as he had burned the letter.

"And what is this mysterious business between you and Sarah, Chan? I'm not a child. Deal me in."

"You're too young."

"But not too young," Hannah's voice was brittle, "to be tossed into the high stake jackpot. Or should I be proud to be handed over for a reward, to you or some quicker triggered man, like Fargo?"

Hannah had a temper, and she caught herself just in time. Perhaps she'd said too much as it was, because the gambler's eyes narrowed a little. If she didn't play it boldly now she'd have Bartholomew suspicious.

She went on, "You saw the way Fargo looked at me. You've got the same look in your eye, my too-handsome Chan. Maybe I like it and maybe I don't. A girl is supposed to feel flattered when men fight over her, but no girl wants to be treated like a kid in pigtails. Fargo would tell me quickly enough . . . if I asked him."

"Stay away from Fargo." Bartholomew's eyes changed color. His flat-toned voice was sharp as whetted steel. He reached out and gripped her shoulder.

Hannah smiled. The grip of his lean, well-kept hand was like steel. She was still smiling when she slapped him hard across the face. Instead of pulling her into his arms, the gambler let go of her.

"Don't ever lay a hand on me again." Hannah's voice was cold. "If Sarah found out, she'd have you shot."

"You'd tell her?"

"No, I wouldn't need to tell her. She finds out whatever she wants to know. Now I'll take the payoff from the saloon and hit the trail for Bradded H."

"Have supper with me, Hannah."

"No."

"I'll ride along with you for a few miles,

then." The gambler wasn't smiling now. "No."

Bartholomew smiled thinly. He took two bulky money sacks from his safe and handed them to her.

"Give my regards," he said flatly, "to Sarah. Tell her the jackpot's open and Chan Bartholomew's dealing. It's a cold deck. Every card in it is marked—including the cards I'm dealing the princess." He opened the private door that led directly outside.

CHAPTER THREE

Turncoat Coward

PREACHER HAWKER and his sons saw Hannah's black-and-white paint gelding standing saddled at the hitchrack in front of the First and Last Chance. They knew Sarah had sent her daughter to town to collect the weekly profits of her saloon.

"She'll be packin' more money home," Preacher snarled, "then me'n you boys will handle in a year's time."

The cattle queen handled all Bradded H money and put Preacher and his sons under wages—niggardly wages.

The Preacher spat tobacco juice, bared yellow teeth. His sons grinned back. And when Hawker reined around and rode out of town the sons followed without question. They knew what he was up to.

There was enough moonlight to see by. The brush that flanked the wagon road offered shadowed shelter. Preacher set his trap about five miles from town. While they waited for Hannah the Preacher pulled a bottle, drank and passed it to Oren. The bottle went the rounds. Yak finally drained it and smashed the empty bottle on the ground.

Even for a job like this Preacher and his sons needed booze to keep courage in the guts and deaden the fear of the future when Sarah found what had happened.

"The old lady," Hawker said, "will be fit to be tied."

"The hell with her," Oren said. He pulled his bottle. It was half empty and gave them each no more than a gulp apiece.

"Let's work on your crock a while, Beal."

They polished off Beal's bottle and were working on Yak's when they sighted Hannah.

But even as they got ready to ride out from behind the brush they spotted the horsebacker closing the gap between himself and the girl. Hannah saw him coming after her and lifted the paint to a lope.

Hawker splattered profanity and clawed for his gun, snarling fighting orders at his sons.

"By the hell," the preacher cursed, "if the three of us can't handle one man, we better throw away our guns an' commence drinkin' milk."

Hawker and his sons rode out from behind the buckbrush, onto the wagon road towards Hannah, guns in their hands. It appeared as though they were coming from Bradded H, headed for town. But their drawn guns indicated otherwise.

For perhaps the first time in her life Hannah Hawker was glad to see her father and brothers.

The man who had followed her out of town pulled his horse up. Fargo was half drunk. Against his own judgment, and strictly against Bartholomew's law, Fargo had bought himself a bottle. And when Fargo reached for the bottle he was a goner. Booze was rank poison to the killer because he was a drunkard. One drink, one drunk. And the hell of it was, booze had a strange effect on him. It sapped his courage. Melted it in his guts. Booze that gave other men false courage tended to turn this killer into a coward. The ghosts of murdered men appeared, closed in on him, their dead eyes stared at him. Their hands reached out at him. That was what booze did to Fargo. Even half drunk, as he was now, he felt his courage ebbing. He pulled up when he sighted the four riders in the moonlight. Sweat beaded his face. His eyes were bloodshot, glazed. He whirled his horse and spurred off into the night, snarling and breathing hard through his slack mouth. And the ghosts of his murdered dead rode flanking him, dead eyes staring, dead mouths blood-flecked and fly-blown as Fargo fled into the night.

For once, it was somebody beside himself who turned tail and Preacher Hawker had a mind to take after the man, overhaul him and shoot him to death.

"The road agent son—" snarled the Preacher. "Now, by the hell, there's one feller that even you three overgrown white-livered whelps could whup. Take

after him, why in the hell don't yuh?"

"The hell with that coyote thing! You fergit what fetched us here, Preacher?"

Hannah pulled up, looked at their drawn guns and laughed. A short, brittle, contemptuous laugh.

"A hell of a way to thank us!" The Preacher sprayed the ground with tobacco spit. "Who was the damn' road agent, anyhow?"

"Road agent?" Hannah smiled. "What is this? A holdup?"

"That's just what it is," Oren sneered. "Tackle 'er, Beal. You an' Yak. Them saddle pockets of hern is shore a-bulgin'."

"You're locoed drunk," Hannah eyed them with contempt. "Take a dollar of this and Sarah will skin you alive."

"The hell with her!"

"When you sober up, you'll change your tune."

"Mebbyso that wasn't no road agent robbery." A cunning look crept into Preacher Hawker's pale eyes. "Mebbyso it was that young Texican Lee Barbee, the two of you a-playin' tag. Ketch the gal an' claim another sweet kiss—and he'd git it without the gal a-puttin' up much of a fight!"

Hannah's smile was gone. "What do you mean?"

"Just hand me that money you got in them saddle pockets," said the Preacher, "and Sarah will never learn it from me, or from the boys here. So far as I'm concerned, you an' that young Texican has got my best wishes. Hell, I'll do even better than that. You name the place an' the time an' have that young feller there and I'll fetch along my Bible. And with Oren an' Beal an' Yak fer witness' I'll pronounce you man an' wife—an' let no man ner hellcat cattle queen put ye asunder. Now I'll just collect my fees in advance."

Oren, Beal and Yak stared at the Preacher, then at their sister. They didn't know what the old man knew.

HANNAH felt sick. She looked Preacher straight in the eye. "What if I don't let you blackmail me out of this money?" she asked quietly.

"Then I'll take the whelps along fer witness and we'll ride home with you. We'll tell Sarah that we seen you an' Barbee a-makin' love. If that wasn't Barbee you was playin' kiss-tag a-horseback with along

the trail, then who in the hell was he?"

"His name is Fargo," Hannah said softly. "He's a hired killer. Preacher Hawker and his three whelps are on Fargo's blacklist." She unbuckled the flaps of her two saddle pockets, took out the money sacks and handed them toward Hawker.

"I didn't count it," she said quietly, "so I don't know how much you've got there. But it's more than no money at all. Take it and quit the Big Sag. Quit the country. Sarah will let you go and call it a good riddance, so long as none of you ever come back."

Hawker made no move to take the sacks. He stared at his daughter as though seeing her for the first time. Then he spoke to his sons without taking his eyes from her. "Oren, take Beal an' Yak and git on to town. Stay as sober as you know how till I git there. Keep your mouths shut or I'll horsewhip the three of you. Rattle your hocks!"

Something in the tone of the Preacher's voice forbade questioning. "This Big Sag cow-country," Hawker held their going with a lifted hand, "has laughed at me and my boys. Called us damned rank cowards—and rightly so. The last thing on earth they'll expect Hawker to do is have his three sons at his back when he makes a fightin' stand. But that's just what might give us some kind of a bulge on 'em and a chance for our taw when us four put up a fight fer Big Sag. I'll meet you boys in town, directly. Now git. And, by the hell, tip your hats to your sister Hannah when you go!"

When the boys had ridden away, Hawker turned to Hannah. "Me an' them big no-good whelps of mine," he said, "are all that ever you kin name us, and worse. I've hid behind that Bible of mine to do a lot of ornery things. But I'm your flesh-and-blood father and it's in Gawdamighty's Book. Mebbyso, in the eyes of that A'mighty Gawd, if you and young Lee Barbee was to stand before me and I was to read from that Bible and furthermore give you my father's blessin', that'd hold you an' Barbee together fer man an' wife—till the time when you kin git the job done by some regular ordained parson, Amen."

Hannah's eyes misted. Perhaps she saw her father for the first time; saw the man he might have been had it not been for the

overpowering, hard hand of her mother.

"That would be good enough, father," she said quietly, "for me and Lee. I thank you for both of us. And we'll take you up on it when the time comes. You're a good man, Preacher Hawker."

"Hold on now, Hannah. I'm no danged good, and we know it!" Hawker chuckled. "That'd be a shore hell of a josh on Sarah." He slapped his chaps with a huge hand.

Hannah smiled a little. Then the smile died. "That would kill her," she said.

"I reckon it would."

"Even after all she's done," Hannah said, "you don't hate her."

"That's because I'm a weaklin', I reckon, but damned if I could ever manage to pack a grudge fer long at a time. And here's somethin' I never told nobody till now. Sometimes when I was preachin' our way through them Yankee an' Rebel lines, there'd be the wounded an' dyin' to set with, and the dead of both sides to bury, and I done it, and I got to believin' I actually was a sky-pilot showin' them dyin' men an' easy crossin' an' pilotin' their last trail to the Great Beyond. If ma had a-let me go my own way then I'd a stayed with that preachin'. I coulda shed myself of orneriness an' drunkenness an' such, never holdin' a grudge or voicin' a mean word ag'in' any man or woman on earth. But your ma had other plans. She had taken away my Bible an' handed me a gun. And I was too cowardly to use a gun. But your ma's got strength, and she worships you. And whatever wrong she's done it was because of that mother love."

Hannah still held the money sacks. Tears welled in her eyes when she held the sacks toward her father.

"Throw away your gun," she said, "and get your Bible. Take this money and quit the Big Sag. Leave it all behind. Don't even look back. Preach your gospels. This money belongs to you because the cattle queen has taken it to give to me. I give it to you, and I can tell her why when I get home. I can make her understand. You have no love for Oren, Beal and Yak. They despise you. So leave them behind wherever you go. Let them work out their own salvation or their damnation, no matter which. Do this for me, your daughter, and find a prayer in that Bible for me and the man I love. When this war of the Big Sag

is over with, then ride back to Big Sag on your preaching circuit and marry me to Lee Barbee. You'll do that for me?"

"I'll do that!"

Preacher Hawker slid his saddle carbine from its scabbard and threw it away. Then unbuckled his filled cartridge belt with its holstered six-shooter and tossed the belt and holstered gun on the ground. He took the old Bible from the tail pocket of the rusty old black swallow-tail coat.

"Keep the money. Give it to Sarah. A grubline ridin' circuit preacher has no need fer money. I'm headed now for Lower Sag. Is there ar y word I kin take to Barbee?"

"Yes. Tell Lee that you'll marry us and give him this description of a man called Fargo, who was hired to bushwhack him and his father."

CHAPTER FOUR

Coffins—Wholesale

PREACHER HAWKER, though headed for Lower Sag, had to stop at Big Sag town to see his sons and pass along Hannah's warning. He also wanted to pick himself up a jug to take along. A man could throw away his guns, the Preacher told himself, and go back to his Bible-shoutin', but he needed the whiskey to kill the ornery sinfulness that poisoned his innards. A preacher needed something to warm him up and fill him with a spiritual glow.

The Hawkers did all their drinking at the First and Last Chance, where they got their booze free. When Preacher walked into the saloon he saw Oren, Beal and Yak standing sullenly at the bar, backed against it with boot heels hooked in the rail but no drinks in their hands. They glared at the closed door of Bartholomew's private office.

"This Cousin Chan son—" Oren said, "has put us on the Injun list."

"The hell yuh say!" Preacher Hawker made a mental reservation to keep his cussing clean. "Bradded H beef money bought this booze and we're the Bradded H Hawkers. Lemme talk to that jailbird. Come along."

With his sons flanking him Hawker strode to the closed office door. He tried the door, found it locked and pounded it with a mighty fist.

The door opened quickly and soundlessly on its oiled hinges and Bartholomew stood there, a double-barreled sawed-off shotgun pointed at Hawker's belly.

"Blast my guts out," Hawker's voice was loud, "murder me, Bartholomew, and I'll die a martyr! This is a Bible I pack in my hand. I come to preach the word of the Maker to the sin-poisoned souls in this den of iniquity. Kill an unarmed man of the cloth and it's murder. Gladly would Preacher Hawker die a martyr in this cause of righteousness. I go henceforth armed only with the good Book. Repent, Cousin Chan Bartholomew! Repent before the walls of this den of vice crumble and the roof caves in to bury you in sin! Repent, I say!"

"Quit your drunken bellowing, Preacher. Come in here. Fetch your whelps. Shut up that damned bellowing. Save your psalm-shouting for fools that believe it. Shut up and get in here!"

Hawker stalked in, the triplets following. Bartholomew shut the door and stood with his back against it, the shotgun covering them.

"One more yelp out of you, Preacher," the tinhorn said softly, "and I'll tear your guts out with buckshot. Shut up and listen. I've got your orders here. Straight from the cattle queen. Take your sons along. The nesters have pooled and they're meeting here at the First and Last Chance. They're gathering now, if you weren't too drunk to see 'em when you came in. You'll throw in with those nesters. And you, Preacher, will lead 'em. You and Oren and Beal and Yak will ride in the lead. Ride down into the Lower Sag. Take back the Lower Sag that you lost to Sam Barbee and his son. Kill any Barbed B Texans that you find. Those are Sarah's orders."

"Sam and Lee Barbee won't take this laying' down," said the Preacher.

"Colonel Sam Barbee," said Chan Bartholomew flatly, "and his son will take it laying down. Laying down dead. They'll be dead by the time you lead this nester outfit out of town and down the Lower Sag."

"You gamblin' on that, Chan?" Hawker's bearded lips twisted.

"I'm gambling on that. So don't let the Barbees scare you out. Unless you're scared of their ghosts."

"I ain't that spooky."

"Then that's that. Now get out—you're stinkin' up my office." Bartholomew opened the door.

"Us Hawkers can't work cold sober," Preacher said. "Take us off your Injun list."

"You'll lead the nesters down into the Lower Sag, Preacher? You and Oren and Beal and Yak will be riding in the lead of this raid?"

Hawker had his Bible in his hand. "This is my weapon. I'll be ridin' into Lower Sag. If them renegades you call nesters has the guts to foller us Bradded H Hawkers, then let 'em come along. Now holler to the bartender to give us Hawkers our likker!"

Bartholomew smiled thinly, ushered them out with the sawed-off shotgun and called to the bartender. Then he shut the door. He wanted to be alone. Things were working according to his plan. Fargo should be down in Lower Sag by now. By day-break Fargo should have Sam Barbee and his son killed. And while Hawker and his whelps were riding into Lower Sag to be killed by Barbed B Texans or shot in the back by Chan Bartholomew's nester-outlaws, Fargo should be winding up his gun chores at Bradded H.

Bartholomew had hired those nesters to squat on the rim of Big Sag. Chan had contacted them on his way up the Outlaw Trail to Big Sag, Montana, and located them on Big Sag rim. They had orders to sit back and pretend they were nesters until Fargo showed up. Now he had sent for them because Fargo was on his way to kill the Barbees. It was time for the nesters to throw away their running irons and oil their guns and, under the leadership of Preacher Hawker and his whelps, kill off every Barbed B Texas cowhand. If the Hawkers survived the war, then the renegade nesters had further orders. They were to kill Preacher and his boys and collect bounty from Bartholomew on the carcasses.

Fargo had his orders, too. To kill off the Barbees, then ride back up the Big Sag to Bradded H and find the cattle queen.

"Kill her," Bartholomew had told Fargo. "Kill her quick. Because if you don't, she'll kill you. You've done her dirty work and therefore know too much to live. You'll

have to kill her to save your own hide, Fargo."

"And after I kill her?"

"Come back here to the First and Last Chance. I'll pay you off."

Fargo hadn't been fooled. Neither was Bartholomew fooling himself. When Big Sag war was over, it would be Fargo and Chan Bartholomew. They'd have the Big Sag. The Barbees and their Texas cowhands killed off. Preacher Hawker and his sons killed off. The cattle queen killed off. The renegade nesters paid off and sent back to the Hole-in-the-Wall. Big Sag would belong to Bartholomew—and along with Big Sag went the princess.

But Fargo had gotten a look at Hannah—and wanted her. Even as Fargo would want the Big Sag. All of it. No pardnership with Bartholomew. Fargo would settle for all or nothing. That's how Bartholomew wanted it, too. That's how he planned it. When the war was over Bartholomew would kill Fargo.

Bartholomew would marry Hannah. That he had a wife named Grace mattered not at all. A gun or knife or a pair of strangler hands could quickly annul that marriage.

So Chan Bartholomew locked himself in his private office and allowed himself a drink of his best whiskey and a long thin black cigar. . . .

OUT at the bar Preacher Hawker told the bartender to give him a jug. He stalked out with the jug, his three sons following through the swinging half-doors. They saddled fresh Braddled H horses that were always kept at the feed barn. Not until they were headed down into Lower Sag did Preacher break the silence. Then he pulled the cork on the jug, drank and passed it to the boys.

"For once in your cowardly lives," he told his sons, "you'll fight like men, takin' your orders from Colonel Sam Barbee. If you ain't got the guts to fight, then ride outa Big Sag right now and never come back. But I'm stayin'—stayin' till the last damned man is shot or hung. That means them renegade nesters. That Fargo gun-slingin' killer. Your ma's cousin Chan that she bought outa the pen to ramrod her war. I'm preachin' their damn' funeral sermons. Then when I've married Hannah to young Barbee, I'll ride my preacher's circuit. I've

thrown away my guns. His Book is my weapon. Now which-away you three goin' to run?"

"Mebbyso," Oren Hawker said, "without you along to coyote fer an example to your whelps, me'n Beal an' Yak will have the guts to put up a gun fight—if the likker holds out."

Beal and Yak grinned. They passed the jug as they rode along. And when they rode up in sight of the Barbed B ranch in the early dawn they saw men and horses at the barn. The pole corral was filled with saddle horses. Men were catching and saddling their mounts.

Hawker rode ahead of his sons. He called out, "Don't shoot. It's Preacher Hawker and my only weapon is the Holy Book. I got important news fer Colonel Barbee. War has bin declared in Big Sag. I've fetched my sons to take your fightin' orders. And I got a personal message fer Lee Barbee from my daughter Hannah. Don't shoot, Colonel!"

"Only my son Lee and my cowhands call me colonel." The grizzled cowman grinned faintly.

"Where's your son?"

"Right here, Preacher."

"You want to marry my daughter?"

"Yes, sir. I do."

"Your father got ary objections?"

"No, sir. The colonel was mighty proud when I told him."

"I told Hannah what I'm tellin' you. Mebbyso there's more genuine parsons in the country but I'm Hannah's father and I reckon I got my right to marry off my own daughter. You got ary objections, Sam Barbee?"

"I'd be almighty proud, Preacher," Sam Barbee said, "if you was to call me colonel from now on."

The three Hawker triplets rode up. Their swagger was gone. The other two prodded Oren into doing their talking.

"We'll work on likker," said Oren Hawker, "and, if we're drunk enough, mebyso we won't rabbit on you. If they kill us off, they ain't killed much nohow. If you kin use us three Hawker whelps, we're takin' your orders."

"We're obliged for your help, boys," Barbee said. "And I'll gamble you don't rabbit in a tight. Now step down and ketch fresh horses. Grab some breakfast at the

cook cabin. We're headed for town. Best way to win this war is to take the fight to 'em. Lee done fetched the news. He got it from Hannah Hawker."

"Where is Hannah?" Lee asked.

"Home with her ma by now. And Sarah won't let nobody on earth harm her girl," the Preacher said. "She gimme the description of a hired killer called Fargo."

"You already know what Bartholomew looks like, Colonel," said Lee Barbee. He mounted his horse and shoved a carbine into the saddle scabbard.

"I'll take care of Bartholomew, son," his father said. "How many men you takin' along?"

"None. You'll need 'em all if them renegade nesters is as tough as they look. I'll go alone."

"Where you headed for, alone?" Hawker asked.

"Your Bradded H home ranch, Preacher. To tell your wife I'm claimin' Hannah for my wife."

"Then I'm goin' along," Hawker chuckled. "I'll marry you two, then and there. Years—long, hard, nag-ridden years—I bin a-waitin' fer this. I wouldn't miss it fer the Big Sag and all the cattle you could graze in it. If the colonel will stake me to a plumb gentle horse that'll pack a preacher an' his Bible. . . ."

Nor would Hawker lose time eating. He gulped down a cup of strong black coffee spiked with whiskey and put chunks of steak between halves of huge biscuits and wolfed the grub as he rode along with Lee into the early dawn.

Hawker rode in the lead, talking back across his shoulder to Lee Barbee. In that gray dawn men and horses were no more than moving blots. The Preacher was calling the young cowman by his first name and addressing him as son.

Fargo was a stranger in a strange land and knew the Hawker men and the Barbees only from descriptions given him by Bartholomew. And in the dawn one man looked like another. Fargo had sobered up and was sick as a poisoned wolf; his nerves were jangled. His aim was a hair's edge unsteady when he mistook Hawker for Sam Barbee.

"... and I'm a-tellin' you, son," Hawker called back across his shoulder. "it'll be the proudest day of my life when we bust the news to Sarah. I'm a-tellin' you right

now, Lee, when you marry Hannah you're a-gittin' the finest gal ever—"

THE .30-30 bullet hit Hawker and his nasal voice shrilled to rasping wail. Preacher pitched over backwards when his horse, spooked by the shot, lunged and whirled.

Barbee had been riding with his hand on his six-shooter. He pulled and fired at the place where he'd caught a glimpse of the gun flash. It was a snap shot and the .45 slug creased Fargo's shoulder. He snarled with pain, turned his horse and jabbed his spurs deep, cursing the booze that had poisoned his guts. The guts he needed to shoot it out with that Texan who was firing now as fast as he could thumb back the hammer.

When the bushwhacker had ridden beyond sight and earshot, Barbee swung from his saddle and squatted beside Hawker. He got his hands sticky with blood. Hawker moaned and tried to get up. The bullet had made a clean hole in the muscle of his shoulder without breaking a bone; he'd struck his head when the horse threw him and he'd been knocked out. He came awake, cussing.

Barbee was getting the wound crudely bandaged when he heard somebody coming on horseback. He silenced Preacher and this time had a saddle carbine instead of a six-shooter when the rider came down the trail. Lee recognized Hannah. She had changed horses and was riding hard. And when Lee called out she gave a glad cry. When she swung from her saddle she would have fallen if Lee hadn't caught her in his arms. She clung to him, dry sobs racking her. It was several minutes before she could talk.

"Never seen you so bad upset, Hannah," her father said. "What ails yuh, girl?"

"It's ma . . . mother . . . somebody shot her! Fargo . . . Fargo—he killed her!"

Hannah had found her mother dead when she got to the Bradded H ranch with the money. Shot through the heart. One shot had killed her when she had opened the door and stood outlined in the lamplight. Fargo must have ridden in while she was sitting up waiting for Hannah to fetch home the money and the message from Chan. She had probably mistaken the rider for Hannah and opened the door. But it had

been Fargo. Fargo had shot and killed her. He'd changed horses and pulled out. The horse he left there was one that belonged to Bartholomew.

Hannah had carried the body inside, lain it on her bed and covered it. Then she'd headed for Lower Sag. She'd heard the firing and kept on coming, headed for Barbed B ranch.

Lee held her in his arms while she talked. Her father fed her a couple swallows from the jug he had hung by a whang leather string from his saddle horn. Then Hannah put aside the shock and grief of her mother's death, to remember something.

"There's a bunch of horsebackers headed towards the Barbed B ranch. Headed for the Lower Sag. They're coming from town, and taking their time . . . like they were waiting for daylight."

"That'll be them nesters," Preacher said. "When Bartholomew found out me'n the triplets pulled out, he sent 'em on down the Sag. They're ridin' cautious because they'll figger that me and the boys has done just what we did do—throw in with the Barbed B outfit."

"I couldn't swear to it," Hannah said, "but the lead rider looked like Chan. Anyhow, he was riding that big spotted-rumped apaloosa that Chan claims is a one-man horse and nobody but Chan ever rode. And he rode like Chan rides. I let 'em ride on, then cut wide around and out-distanced them. But we'd better get on to the Barbed B and warn the colonel. . . ."

"You kin hold on a few minutes," Hawker stood there with his Bible in his hand. "While I marry you two young 'uns. Lee, take Hannah's hand in yourn. Stand there together."

CHAPTER FIVE

Gunfire at Dawn

THERE was the old saying that if a man wanted a thing done right he had to do it himself. Chan Bartholomew knew that if Fargo failed, then he had Fargo's chores to do.

"I didn't sell that Fargo no bottle," said the Last Chance bartender. "He walked in behind the bar and took a quart off the backbar. I ain't paid to try to stop a man with them kind of eyes. What's wrong, Chan? You look like it was the end of the world a-comin'."

"Shut up! I'm askin' the questions. You say Hawker took a jug and walked out?"

"With his three sons behind him. The barn man says they saddled fresh horses and headed fer the Lower Sag."

"Bad news, Chan?" Goldie asked.

Bartholomew found her in his office when he went back there to get his guns.

The gambler looked at her a moment and then knocked her down. He was starting to kick her in the face when he saw the derringer in her hand. He stepped back; he was as close to death that second as ever he'd been.

Goldie got up slowly. The derringer still pointed at him. Then she told him to stand aside and let her out.

"That's the first time you ever hit me, Chan. It's the last time. That played your luck out, tinhorn. You can have this now. Burn it. Along with your luck." She took the wedding certificate from the bosom of her dress and handed it to him and told him to touch a match to it. She stood there



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with the derringer in her hand until the document she'd held as a weapon against him was burnt.

Then, before he had any inkling of her intentions, she lifted the little .44 to her temple. The explosion filled the office and she crumpled to the floor.

Bartholomew stood there, the color drained from his face. His hands shook as he buckled on his cartridge belt and holstered six-shooter and took a saddle carbine from its rack.

Bartholomew never drank enough to even make him tipsy. Whiskey was dangerous. But he went in behind the bar and helped himself to a stiff drink and took the bottle with him. He motioned to the renegades who had gathered in the saloon.

"Let's go." His voice cracked.

"You comin' along, Chan?"

"I'm leadin' this outfit—to hell, if that's where we're headed. Let's go!"

The gambler rode in the lead as they headed down the Big Sag. He was still riding well in the lead when they sighted a lone rider coming like the devil was after him. They bushed up and waited—and let Fargo ride into their ambush. Bartholomew called out, "What's your hurry, Fargo?"

Fargo reined up his sweating, blowing horse. When Bartholomew and his renegades rode out from behind the brush Fargo had a tight grip on himself. Every sense was alert. He could tell from the gambler's voice and the look on his face that Chan was half drunk—and scared. It would be a good time to kill Chan. Except for the fact that the gun in the gambler's hand was cocked and pointed at Fargo's belly.

"I warned you not to get drunk, Fargo."

"Do I look drunk? You're drunker than a fool yourself!"

"You git your chores done, Fargo?"

"Part done. And I kin handle the rest. Which-away, Chan?"

"We'll reach the Barbed B ranch a little after daylight. Then it's every man for himself. You're comin' along. You taken care of the Barbees?"

"I'll tell you while we ride. We don't take no more orders from Sarah. She's dead."

"That's worth something. Where's the princess?"

"I wish I knewed. Put up that gun, tinhorn. You'll need me before sunrise."

"That's no lie." Bartholomew put away his gun.

They rode ahead of the others. Far enough ahead so that they could talk. No need of secrets between these two black-legs. They each told what there was to tell. And they rode along together to share the ugly burden of their fears and superstitions. Their luck was turning bad. But bad or good, they had to play it out to the end.

Chan took a drink and saw Fargo eyeing the bottle. Then Fargo grinned flatly and shook his head.

"I puked up what I drunk. That's the hair of the dog that bit me. But it's hydrophobia dog. And you better go easy."

"Goldie's ghost." Chan Bartholomew took another drink before he corked the bottle and shoved it into his chaps pocket.

THEN they sighted the Barbed B cow-punchers silhouetted against the sky. In the lead rode Colonel Sam.

Then a lone rider showed and the colonel slowed. It was Lee riding alone.

Lee had sent Hawker and Hannah on to the Barbed B and had cut across to head off the colonel. The colonel pointed up the Big Sag towards the bunch of riders headed their way.

"Yonder they come, Lee. Here's where we lock horns. No use tellin' you to stay outa this ruckus."

"Not a bit of use in the world, Colonel. Even if I am just married. Somehow I got a notion my new bride would tear up the contract if I quit my own outfit in a tight. She'd rather mourn at my grave. Take good care of your hide, Colonel. I'm too young to run this Big Sag outfit all by myself. That's Bartholomew on that apaloosa. That'll be the Fargo killer with him. If we git a choice, Colonel, gimme that Fargo."

"I'd like a crack at that Bartholomew," the colonel said.

Then he said he wondered just how much sportin' blood that gambler had. The colonel tied his white silk neck handkerchief to the end of his saddle gun barrel and rode out. Lee went with him.

When they got within hailing distance, Sam Barbee barked his challenge.

"Ride out and meet me'n my son, Bartholomew. Fetch Fargo with you."

Every man on both sides saw Hawker

top the rise a hundred yards away. There was blood on his black coat; he loomed high in the saddle and had the old Bible open in his hand. He reined up and with the blood-streaked dawn for his background lifted his voice in a prayer of his own making.

"The Lord will protect those men among ye who have honesty and goodness and righteousness in your hearts!" Hawker's voice sounded clear-toned as a trumpet. "Yeah, verily! And the devil in hell shall this day claim his own. The flaming sword shall smite down ye who have killed so wantonly. Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord. . . . And the Almighty God shall protect those men who believe in Him. Amen!"

"You believe in God, Bartholomew?" Fargo bared his teeth in a flat grin.

"The devil backs our game, Fargo," the gambler said softly.

Bartholomew and Fargo had their guns in their hands and they rode slowly out to meet Barbee and his son.

Sam and Lee came at a walk. The colonel had taken the handkerchief from his gun barrel. They were in range now.

Four guns lifted and vomited smoke and flame. The Preacher's words held truth: God was on the side of the Barbees. Bartholomew's and Fargo's shots were wild. Both men were mortally wounded. The colonel and Lee were firing at the bellies and they did not miss. The gut shots had spoiled the aim of the gambler and Fargo. Death was glazing their eyes and they could not see, but they kept on shooting. Bartholomew leaned forward and then went limp. He pitched headlong. His feet came out of their stirrups and he was dead when he hit the ground.

Fargo died in his saddle. He swayed like a drunken man; his head lobbed forward. He collapsed and pitched over sideways and out of the saddle. For a moment his left boot hung in the stirrup before it slid free and that leg fell limply and he lay there dead.

Sam Barbee held his smoking gun in his hand and looked at Lee.

"How'd you make out, son?"

"If anything hit me I haven't felt it yet, Colonel. How'd you come through?"

"Nary a scratch. From here on, son, Preacher Hawker's got a firm believer."

They might have given those renegade nesters a chance to throw their guns and quit the Big Sag, but the triplets were drunk now. Their saddle carbines lifted and their eyes lined their sights. Three renegades swayed and toppled. The three Hawkers spurred forward, guns spewing. The Barbed B Texans were right behind the Hawkers. The outlaws weren't fighting for money now. They fought to save their hides, and it was a hard-fought desperate gun battle while it lasted. No mercy was asked and no quarter given. Then it was over; a few scattered shots finished off the wounded. Then the Barbed B Texans came riding back. And three Bradded H horses stood, range-tied with the dropped bridle reins, beside the bodies of Oren and Beal and Yak Hawker.

That evening at sundown the dead were buried. Chan Bartholomew and Fargo were buried side by side, their renegades in a row of graves. And apart from those graves Oren and Beal and Yak Hawker were laid to rest.

Hawker preached the funeral sermon at the graves of his sons. Dry-eyed, but with his voice softened by grief, the man said farewell to the boys he had reared.

". . . and so ye died, my sons, cleareds forever of the taint of cowardice. Ye died brave men and may Almighty God have mercy on your souls. Amen."

Then Hawker rode up Big Sag to the Bradded H to bury his wife. Hannah rode with him in the night.

It was the following day and Colonel Sam Barbee had taken his Texans and ridden to Big Sag to take that cowtown the news. Lee rode alone up Big Sag to meet his bride. The sun was shining down out of a cloudless sky when they caught sight of each other. After a time Hannah broke the silence.

"My father loved my mother. And, in her own way, she still loved him. She had saved her wedding dress and was buried in it."

And then Hawker rode away to devote the rest of his life to preaching.

"Preacher Hawker will come back sometime to the Big Snag."

"It was his to begin with, Hannah. His to come back to. And the Big Sag is ours now. Yours and mine."

LAST COMMAND

By

GEORGE C. APPELL

Down from Canada swept one hundred killing, burning, looting Crees, toward rendezvous with nineteen U. S. cavalymen. . . . And each trooper knew that his captain rode on his last command. . . .

THE unloading was moving fast, faster than Styers had hoped, and he looked at his watch and noted, gratefully, that in twenty minutes they had debarked two officers, seventeen men, one Crow scout and an Indian pony. Styers smoothed his animal's neck and spoke to it, murmuring softly, quieting a nervousness that had come from a four-day trip up the river. Horses do not become acclimated to boiler decks, and these were no exception. "Steady, now . . . steady, you. . . ."

Then Lieutenant Lowbridge held up a fist, fingers forward, and swung it once. "All ashore, Captain."

Styers nodded. He glanced up at the pilothouse and waved to the captain. "Thanks for the voyage, Marsh. See you later."

Marsh waved back. "Have a nice hunt." He grinned.

But Styers was frowning. He watched while the plank was drawn in, waited as he heard the bell jangle in the engineroom, then signaled to Sergeant Schimmel. "Form twos."

The river steamer backed slowly off into the current of the Missouri; the whistle shrieked wetly and the forming column broke suddenly, horses dancing. Schimmel pointed to the trumpeter, and the first blaring notes brought the column back into line.

Lowbridge swung to his saddle and gathered rein, face turned up toward the Texas where a smiling, flat-faced man was leaning from a window. The man saluted mockingly, and Lowbridge spat hard into the dust. The man leaned out and cupped his hands: "Your hand'll be waiting for you, Lieutenant."

Lowbridge saluted stiffly, spat again, and

wheeled for the waiting column. He fell in at Styers' left and they started west from the river at a walk. Half a mile inland they stopped once and listened to the faint whoop of the whistle; then they were alone on the face of the world, alone and presumably forgotten, until they should recall their existence to men's minds by reporting certain things done or not done. . . .

Styers lighted a pipe, turned the bowl down from force of habit and relaxed in the saddle. This would be his last mission, in all probability; his last gesture for the service in which he'd spent his life. They'd told him, a week before, that orders were coming west from Chicago, and then it would be all over for Jonathan Styers, Captain, Cavalry, U. S. A. He could go home then on half-pay, sit on the porch of the Tuckahoe Arms and bore people with tales of wounds and campaigns, of deaths and escapes, of freezing and frying. He could, but he wouldn't.

He slipped his eyes to Lowbridge and wondered what would happen to that young man in the next thirty years. A couple of promotions, no doubt. And maybe a war or two, and if one of the wars was really big, Lowbridge would get a regiment, maybe, and possibly a division. Styers had had a division once, until it was shot to pieces at Shiloh and he with it. They'd almost surveyed him out of the service, after that. Almost, but not quite. He'd stacked a poker hand against the surgeon's and the surgeon had lost on a bluff.

"Mr. Lowbridge."

"Sir?"

Styers rapped his pipe on the pommel and shook ash. "Do you comprehend the convolutions in a staff officer's skull?"

The lieutenant stiffened, lips tight.

They found the body broken
and bleeding and
ripped to shreds



"Nossir." He looked hard at the captain.

"Well, neither do I." He put the empty pipe back in his teeth and sucked air. "Now that thing last night: forget it. What I'm talking about is this ghost hunt we're on."

Lowbridge nodded grimly. "Anyone who'd pull a hand like that would send his mother to hell."

The captain pursed his shrunken mouth in approval. "Well spoken, mister, and true. But do you see the whole thing as it stands? Some scared-out trapper reports Cree down in here from Canada, so they send us out to find 'em, although everyone knows that Cree don't come this far south. So it's a bluff all the way around. He pulled the pipe loose and jerked it over his shoulder. "Somewhat like the bluff you tumbled into last night."

The wrath was still in Lowbridge, in deep. He glared at the westering sun and unconsciously clutched his reins until they creaked. "It wasn't honest poker, Captain."

Styers shrugged. "So long's the cards

are honest, the game's honest. That major from staff used a tactic to win, and he won. Swallow it."

"I will not, sir."

"All right, gag on it. The taste is worse." Styers wanted to talk, wanted to teach. Not the kind of talk that would be expected of him on the porch at Tuckahoe, but the kind that could help a newcomer and leave him with something to apply, should he have to. Lowbridge would take the troop when Styers went east. The captain wanted to leave something of himself besides greasy cards and a tired horse and a cracked shaving mug on a board shelf. He wanted desperately to tell Lowbridge that life itself is a bluff, a house of cards, and that it will fall on anyone who doesn't watch out. Regrets after the event never help. "Yes, Mr. Lowbridge, that major is a high-priced thinker from Omaha, and in a way he was kind to you. He could have been a Cheyenne warrior, the kind of opponent who is not disposed to show mercy."

Lowbridge sniffed. "A thin analogy, Captain."

"Perhaps. You see, that major man knew his ground, his terrain. Knew the game. You didn't. He knew you didn't. So he pulled you in close, let you fall for his bluff and, by God, you fell." Styers shifted weight in the saddle. "What I mean is, the next time you'll watch out, in poker, whereas had the event happened against Cheyenne, you wouldn't be around to watch out for a next time."

"Still thin, sir, if I may be permitted the opinion."

"Approved. And if it'll make you feel any better, remember this: a staff officer is a plaster-of-paris codfish, a human petrification with a heart of feldspar, possessing neither bowels, passion nor humor. Happily, he never reproduces and he finally, all of him, goes to hell."

THEY bivouaced on the rim of tortuous terrain that spread away into the sun, a broken jumble of ravines and ledges and unbalanced slopes that lay scrambled like a huge, shattered platter. Styers eyed it narrowly. "If Cree get in there, they won't get out."

"They're Indians," Lowbridge observed, peeling off a shirt and wiping his chest with it.

"But they don't know the ground, mister. We do, by way of him." And he nodded toward Little Bear, the Crow, hunched over hardtack and bacon.

They bedded down in the dusk, the first night in five to be spent on land. The sentries went out, one post at the picket line, and the darkness brought sleep.

Styers, lying in his blanket, felt age surge slowly through his veins, sensed the tiredness of it in his brain, knew it for what it was and sighed once, then bit his lip. Thirty years before he'd had visions of finishing his career wearing white plumes and waving a saber at a charging enemy; but tonight, a week from retirement, he wanted only to sit in peace and maybe deal a hand of stud, and perhaps talk of the old days with Mr. Meacham, the post sutler.

He most certainly did not wish to perform his last duty with half a troop of men and a tight-jawed lieutenant who resented learning something, no matter what the

price of the lesson. Styers felt a little sad.

"Awake, mister?"

Lowbridge grunted. "Almost, sir."

"How much did that major take out of you?"

"Sixty-two dollars, damn it. I'll have to serve two months to square it."

"Cheap, mister. Nice teaching, too."

"Sir?"

But Styers didn't answer. He lay back in the blanket, hearing the night, feeling little stabs of regret fall with the beat of his heart; feeling, suddenly, very old and very much alone. There was replenishment to be made, something to be given in place of himself, and there was nothing to make it with, nothing to give. He sighed again and blinked once under the stars. . . .

Hand-to-shoulder reveille came at four o'clock and twenty minutes later they were filing slowly into the badlands, picking their way through bunch grass and shale and the jagged cracks that grew wider with the miles. An hour after sunrise, Styers reined in, head cocked, and halted the column.

"What is it?" Lowbridge blurted.

"Quiet, now." The captain bent forward, face pinched with tenseness. He straightened, finally and gazed ahead at Little Bear.

The Crow turned his pony and trotted back to the column. "Absaroka." He stabbed a finger southwestward, mouth pressed shut. The glint of his eyes caught Styers' trap-faced reflection.

"Big warriors, Mr. Lowbridge. Crow talk." He faced Little Bear and spoke rapidly. The scout answered. "Firing many guns, mister," Styers interpreted. "No game up there, so men kill men."

They picked up the pace and lined into the southwest, brains alert, eyes wide, carbines loose. Little Bear kept ahead, topping a sharp slope to study the land, giving the signal to advance, disappearing beyond; re-appearing on another crest, standing high in his stirrups, waving the column on. And so they probed the land of treacherous, short horizons and shadowy depths and deceitful defiles until, near mid-morning, Little Bear raised his carbine high and held it there.

Styers waved a halt. "Sergeant Schimmel." The captain stuck his pipe in his mouth and sucked slowly at the empty bowl. "Get up there with the Crow, then

report." He stared out across the valley.

Schimmel plunged into the valley, crossed at a gallop and labored up the opposite side. He reached Little Bear and stopped, just below the skyline, and they commenced talking.

The captain blew out his breath. "Mr. Lowbridge, you will discover that non-coms and Indians are both damned good liars. Put one against the other as check-mates, and you might—if you're lucky—arrive at the facts."

And then Schimmel signaled them on, and they moved down into the valley and pumped up the steep side to where the sergeant and Little Bear waited. Schimmel edged forward to the crest and pointed south without speaking.

Ahead lay smoke.

IT SHIMMERED upward, unbroken by a breeze, and it was dark and heavy and still. The captain flung his arm and the detail fell away into line of skirmishers; they spurred forward over the crest at a clip-trot, awake with watchfulness, knees tight for the sudden lunge that can come from a frightened horse. And half an hour ahead they found it, found it lying in the smoke from the burning wagon; found it broken and bleeding and ripped to shreds.

"Not nice, is it?" The captain slipped to the ground and bent over the nearest body. He straightened and looked at Little Bear and they nodded in unison. "Cree, all right. See there, Mr. Lowbridge: that cut across the breastbone. That's Cree death mark. Sioux, now, they slice from hipbone to knee. Remember these things, for they're the calling cards of the tribes." He dusted his hands and walked past the smoldering wagon to the other two bodies. One had been lashed to a wheel and left to burn with it in the grease, but the rawhide had fallen to ash and the body had sagged awkwardly forward. There was no face left, only a mush of pulverized bone and cartilage. But the death mark was there, blistering from fire.

Lowbridge stood in awed silence by the third body, the remains of an old man who had been scalped and cut and left to die.

They scraped three shallow pits in the prairie and stood to horse while Styers took off his hat and lowered his chin and tried to think of a prayer. He couldn't, so

he put on his hat, raised his chin and motioned to Schimmel. Three troopers filled earth over the graves and the detail swung to saddle again. The captain spoke quickly to Little Bear and the Crow trotted away on the pony tracks left by the killers.

"Cree raiders from Canada, Mr. Lowbridge, and damned near a hundred miles south of where they belong. And they took the wagon team with 'em, so things must be tough in Canada."

Lowbridge remembered the staff major. "The rumor must've been right, then."

"Strange, for a rumor. I guess our friend took the boat ride in hopes of seeing action from the deck."

"He took the boat ride to play poker, the ungentlemanly custard."

And Styers pulled yellowed fingers the length of his tanned jaw and tried not to smile. For here was a man who had much to learn, the tactics of life as well as of cards. "Very well, Mr. Lowbridge."

* * *

Little Bear waited for them near the base of a butte, dismounted and squatting. He shook his head and batted his forehead and shook his head again. "Absaroka deneseraka." He shrugged.

Styers cocked an eye at the trail and judged that half the party had gone left of the butte and half to the right. He told the Crow to scout ahead, then translated for Lowbridge. "They're bewildered, they don't know the land. Too far off the reservation."

"They can't move too fast with a wagon team in tow."

"That's why they'll swing north soon. Have to. And Indian ponies won't eat oats, while team horses are grain-fed. All most inconvenient."

The Crow popped into sight beyond the butte and the detail rode toward him. The trails joined again there, and the Crow pointed west.

Styers grinned up one side of his face. "What I thought. West now, then north for home. Well, inasmuch as we know the land and they don't know the land, we'll cut 'em off." He spoke to Little Bear and sent him into the northwest, a mile ahead of the troopers; he was still grinning as he waved the detail on, and fifteen minutes

farther he glanced at Mr. Lowbridge and cleared his throat huskily. "If you know the ground, the game, you can play your cards out and make the other fellow take 'em." He coughed harshly and spat. "Even a staff officer knows that."

They threaded their way across the broken floor of the plains, the sinking sun at their left while to the right gray piles of clouds mounted from the east. Once Little Bear stretched high from his pony, tense as a pointer, and held them still for minutes. Then he sank to his pony's back and waved them on again, on through bunch grass and weed and the tilting, uneven slopes of the empty land which had become, for the time, a theater of fear.

They trailed the shadows of late afternoon, riding loosely as men half-asleep; limp spines let bodies sway and faces lurched downward, pouched with fatigue. A cupful of men feeling the fabric of the land in the bend of the Missouri. Twenty men and nineteen horses and a pony. Twenty carbines and twenty pistols and a tomahawk pricking the flank of half a hundred hunger-grim renegade riders armed with weapons taken from the field of Greasy Grass where Yellow Hair had died, had been shot in the temple and shot in the chest and left to lie with eyes wide open, dead as all the rest.

Styers thumbed one side of his face, then held up a hand to the detail. "There's our hotel, Mr. Lowbridge."

It reminded Lowbridge of an earthen waterfall, so swiftly did the land break away into a ravine; and the ravine was narrow and deep. Lowbridge judged its width at twenty yards.

"We're not bivouacing in there, sir?"

"Hardly." Styers glanced at the darkening sky and the cloud masses coming in from the east. "There'll be no stars, no moon. We won't worry about skylining ourselves." He pointed at the crest of the ravine. "On there we camp, and be damned sure you don't fall in."

IN THE gloom of evening Styers sat, a dead pipe hanging from lax lips. He had a plan now, the last he'd ever make, to be sure; a plan which, if it succeeded, would leave a legacy far greater than a tired horse and worn cards and a cracked shaving mug. A plan which, if it failed, would

leave nothing at all. No Styers, no Lowbridge, no Schimmel. Nothing.

But there are times when a man plays his hand to the hilt, throws in for the whole pot and takes it all or goes broke. If you know the game you can do it.

Styers tapped the pipestem on his teeth idly, and Little Bear lifted his head from a blanket. Styers studied the Crow's set features for a moment, then asked, "This afternoon when you halted us for so long, you saw them?" The Crow nodded, and Styers went on, voice warbling in the mountain tongue, "You are sure?" And, "We and they ride parallel lines now?" The Crow shook his head and held out both hands, fingers aimed at fingers. Then he pushed the hands together until the fingers crossed in front of him. "Nab-erota." Intercept.

The captain looked satisfied. After a while he thrust his pipe into a pocket, rose quickly and found Schimmel near the break of land leading into the ravine. "In about one hour, Sergeant, when it's full dark, you lay out four squad fires along this crest and just below it. Below it, hear? Squad fires, not big ones."

Lowbridge got to his feet, hat in hand, shirt open. He stopped Styers in the dark. "I heard that, Captain." He paused, waiting, but Styers didn't speak. "Seems to me, Captain, they'll be fine signal fires for fifty-odd Cree who must be crossing our trail tonight."

"You've seen this stunt before, mister." Styers hitched his belt up and when he spoke, the words struck like stones. "Stand by to break camp. On my order, move the detail down to the east end of the ravine, where it flattens out."

The troopers disturbed the darkness with movement and breathing and whispered questions; they fingered for and found belts and hats and packets of plug and the palmfuls of paraphernalia that men lose in the darkness, however alert they are. And then the first of the fires globed the night with dancing yellow dullness; and the second and third went up; and when the fourth was alive, Schimmel reported.

"Alert the detail," Styers said calmly. "Each man to horse, and he'll lead his own animal on foot. Stand by." The captain touched Lowbridge on the arm. "Snaffle

your horse, mister. You'll lead, you and Little Bear. I'll follow. Take 'em no farther than the east end of the ravine. It's three hundred yards from here, if you've noticed." He slapped his palms together and spat hard. "Line of skirmishers. Horseholders to the rear." And he was gone in the shadows, spurs snicking evenly.

LOWBRIDGE watched the detail shuffle into line, horses backing and bumping, men hissing. He called Schimmel and told him to ask Little Bear where the captain was. Schimmel said the captain had gone around the west end of the ravine on horseback. He would meet the detail at the east end just before dawn.

They footed slowly through the blackness of a crisp, cloudy night, bearing left slightly, away from the ravine. Lowbridge turned, once, and saw the four fires in the distance behind, four soggy balls of light that shook slightly in the faint wind. He faced forward, shivered, and led on toward the east.

"One-in-four," the word went around, and horseholders fell aside, gathered reins and moved away. Lowbridge stationed his thirteen remaining men in a semi-circle around the end of the ravine, heels east and faces west. He threatened them with a forced march to Canada if any should raise a sound.

The east lightened slowly, reluctantly, smeared with cloud scud and whitening dawn. Clumps of things became distinct, things like grass and pits and the prone forms of men. The grasses quivered with the breathing of dawn and Lowbridge shivered, again, and pried the grayness

for a sign of Styers. He saw him then.

He came on foot, one hand on the reins, the other holding his pipe. He reminded Lowbridge of a novice returning from a ride. He strolled past to the horseholders and came back and lay down next to Lowbridge. "Soon, now. And pass the word: no firing unless I order it."

This might be pretty good, Styers thought. It wouldn't be a plumed charge, sabers swinging; but it might be a good thing anyway. And it had lesson value, if nothing else. A bluff is a delicate thing, when you're playing your every card; and a bluff is a dangerous thing, when you're playing only a single card. Styers sighed and tapped his teeth with the pipestem and felt the years in his veins, felt the age in his heart, and suddenly knew he was old and tired and almost through. Knew that soon they'd send him east and then it would be all over for Jonathan Styers, Captain, Cavalry, U. S. A. All over, except for the last few years on the porch of an inn, and none would know what he'd left behind; would recognize nothing of him except what they saw. A deck of cards. An old belt.

"That must have belonged to Styers. Remember Styers?"

Some would, but not for long. Then none would, and there would be nothing of him except a memory or a gesture or something he'd said. No replenishment except something carried in the mind of a man, in the brain of another. Even a house of cards leaves nothing when it falls.

"Mr. Lowbridge—off to your left. Watch hard."

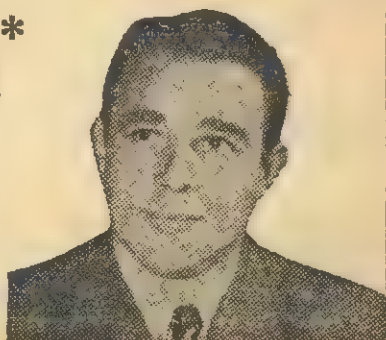
The waiting men felt it first. A thrumming of the earth, a vibration in the dust.

Edward Mann*

**has switched to Calvert because
Calvert makes a lighter highball**

*of 1522 Kelton Ave., W. Los Angeles, Calif.

CALVERT RESERVE Blended Whiskey — 86.8 Proof — 65% Grain
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Then it was heard and it tingled the ears. The swift drumming of galloping ponies and the high scream of a wild cry sounding as one sweeping up from the south, rushing north toward the fires. They flashed from the dawn mist, fifty or more in a ragged line of riders low along straining necks, carbines spearing the wind. They lunged for the fires with screaming throats and slamming carbines and they screamed like spirits torn from the dead as their ponies slipped, skidded, twisted and tumbled into the shadowed ravine. One turned, fighting a sliding pony's twitching neck, and Styers dropped him with a shot. And then there was no sound but a rasping cry from the ravine, a cry that lifted and fell, lifted and fell, until it ended and was no more.

The fires wobbled weakly in the day breeze, and dawn slid slowly across the land. All things became distinct, took on shape and color and size; and last to take the light of the day were the shattered bodies in the ravine below.

A pony kicked convulsively, hide torn from the fall, and Schimmel fired once.

THEY scattered the fires and booted coals and ashes into the ravine. Styers reloaded, from long habit, and lighted his pipe and turned the bowl down, from habit. "Prepare to mount." Little Bear climbed up from the bodies and approached the captain with eyes alight. He held out three clotted scalps, one of them hairless, but Styers shook his head.

"Mount." The captain estimated a day and a half to the river, where they'd probably have to wait another day for the steamer. Staff officers never could figure timing anyway. He glanced at Lowbridge. "Familiar to you now?"

"Sir?"

Styers lifted an arm and dropped it and

the march to the river started. "You've seen that stunt before, mister. You saw it aboard the steamer coming up the river when a man who knew the terrain and knew the game sucked you in close, then let you tumble. A bluff, of course, but you were eager, you were mad, so you fell for it." They rode at a walk, hats low under the face of the sun, their elbows loose on hips.

Quite suddenly, Lowbridge knew where the captain had gone the night before. "That was a long, long chance you took, sir."

"Leading them in? No, I just let them see me, and they followed. Bait for a bluff, call it. High stakes, but when the other fellow's on strange ground, mister. . . ." Quiet now, he warned himself. You sound like a bore on the porch of an inn. "Staff officers don't know much, do they Mr. Lowbridge?"

"Nossir!" And Lowbridge's voice rang like a bell. He jaunted in the saddle and showed his teeth in a smile. "A man can learn much more in the field." He figured for a moment, figured with half-closed eyes, then brightened. "Maybe it won't take me two months to get that sixty-two dollars back, after all. If that staff major's aboard the steamer, why—"

"Careful, mister, careful." Styers let out a little sigh and shifted weight. "Build your house slowly, boy, and it won't come down so fast."

And they rode east toward the river at a walk, Styers for the last time, Lowbridge for the first. But the captain didn't mind so much now; was certain, at last, that something would remain besides a belt, or a mug or a cast of cards.

He blinked in the heat of the sun and swallowed and rose slightly, knees tight. "For-a-ard—gallop!"

WHAT A CRUST!

POSSESSOR of the greatest appetite in gold-hungry Alder Gulch was the Great American Pie Eater, who bragged that he could bite right through seven pies at once. A stranger wagered three sacks of gold dust that it couldn't be done. What was more, he was willing to furnish the pies. The pies were stacked and the Pie Eater, stretching wide his enormous mouth, clamped down hard. His jaw muscles bunched, and he howled as a tooth splintered, but he got nowhere. Then his eyes caught the glint of metal among the mangled pastry and he went for his gun as he realized the stranger had neglected to remove the tin pie plates. But the gambler and the stakes had disappeared.

—Jhan Robbins

THE FOURTH WISE MAN

By
PHIL RAY



One of the men hunkered over him, holding a whiskey bottle

Sod-buster Johnson clod-hopped along to the edge of eternity to learn that a cow-country medico's glistening probe, plus a soft-spoken lie, can save more lives than a thousand drygulch rifle slugs can kill. . . .

THE moment my office door was flung open and I saw Travis Johnson standing there like some kind of brute force with that wild look in his eyes I knew some one had been hurt. At first, I thought of Travis' woman, Sabina, and her new baby. But then I noticed the carbine gripped tight beneath the man's bony fingers and I judged he had got into a fight and maybe killed a man.

That would have surprised me some because Travis was a peaceable man and not given to quarrels with his neighbors. He was one of the few nesters we had in the Territory at the time and he had learned early that folks would only tolerate him provided he kept his distance. The cow-

men might have run him clean out long ago, only Travis had settled on good wet bottom land and had never set his plow to soil that wasn't fit for it. Still, there was bad blood between him and the ranchers, a natural hostility that no one could do much about.

I guess he didn't realize he was pointing the carbine right at me when he said, "You got to come with me, Doc. I've got the team downstairs. We got to hurry."

I wouldn't have argued with him anyway. A doctor has his duty to perform and it don't take the point of a gun to make him realize that. I got my bag and followed Travis down the stairs. He was a tall, hatchet-faced man who wore large brogan shoes and faded blue overalls that sagged over his gaunt frame. Trouble had been a dead weight against his lean shoulders and they had bent some under the burden.

Sabina was huddled in the doorway at the foot of the stairs with the baby in her arms. There was a look of cold apprehensiveness on her young face as we rushed by her. I stopped and laid a hand on her arm, looking down at the tiny face of her son. "That boy of yours is looking mighty fine, Sabina." I tried to say it casual like. I could see she was scared stiff.

She looked past me at first and then when her glance met mine I could see that the young one favored her. And I could see the fear that widened her eyes, though I didn't know why at the time. "He should of stayed out of it," she said. "It ain't our affair. See he gets back safe, doctor. I don't want nothing to happen to him."

I gave her a reassuring pat. "Don't you worry, Sabina. Ain't no harm coming to Travis. We'll be all right."

"We got to hurry," Travis said as I climbed up on the seat beside him. "You go stay with Miz' Croy," he called back to Sabina. "We'll be back directly."

"Mind you, Trav', be careful now . . ." And then I had lost sight of Sabina as Travis whipped his team forward, leaving a haze of thick yellow dust where they had stood.

We found old Zack Trotter out on the big vega north of town. Travis' running team had cut through the tall grass like a sharp scythe, leaving a broad trail of leveled turf behind us. This was in the days before the great horde of sod-busters had

assailed the Territory and the buffalo grass still stood wither high to a rangy horse in many places. Spring had come early to the Merino basin this year and the grass loomed up high and green and beautiful. To the ranchers the grass was everything. It meant feed for the tens of thousands of cattle that roamed the basin; it meant prosperity, often wealth, for their owners.

Two of Zack Trotter's men were already there. One of the men was hunkered over him, holding a whiskey bottle to his lips. Zack was still conscious and it looked like he had swallowed half the bottle already. I could hear him cussing as I jumped down from the board seat.

He had slobbered some of the liquor and it dampened his shirt front. I knelt down, opened my bag and started to cut his trousers away. The wound was in the upper part of his leg. It had spilled a crimson pool onto the ground beside him.

"You got here quick, Doc," he said, gritting his teeth against the pain.

"Yeah, Johnson brought me."

"Johnson." He started cussing again. I glanced quickly over my shoulder and saw Travis standing quietly near the wagon, shielding his glance from the hostile stares of the two punchers. "Damn' squatter," the old man muttered. "Lousy range varmints'll ruin the country, Doc. I can see it comin'. Like a bunch of hungry ants . . . Can't stop 'em."

I didn't like to hear Zack talking like that with Travis standing so near. Being neither cattleman nor farmer, I'd always tried to stay in the middle and see both sides. Maybe I leaned a little in favor of the cattlemen, but I guess there was something to be said for Travis and his breed too. Anyway, I wanted Zack to shut up. He might have been a little out of his head but he knew what he was saying all right.

"Take it easy," I said. "This ain't going to feel good." I glanced up at the puncher who stood near. "Better give him another drink, Sam."

I took the probe and began searching for the slug. Zack sucked in his breath between his teeth. The blood gushed out then and I started working faster. It was in a bad place and the bullet had shattered the bone. I figured Zack would be laid up for a long time.

When I got the bullet out I held it up

with the forceps and Sam took it. "Heavy caliber," he said. "They can do a lot of damage."

I looked down at the old man but he had passed out.

I WANTED to load Zack into Travis' wagon and take him back with me, but Sam said he had one of the boys coming out with a spring wagon. I noticed the suspicious way Sam and the other rider kept eyeing Travis. They had noticed the carbine laying across the seat too, and that didn't help matters any. But they didn't do anything. Maybe if Travis had opened his mouth there would have been trouble. But I reckon he knew better than to say anything. He was an outsider here and he felt that.

After I had done what I could for the old man, and one of the boys had come with the wagon, Travis and I headed back to town. He took it slow and for a long time said nothing, holding the ribbons loose in his hands, his mouth a line across that lean, almost expressionless face. I watched the tall grass being plowed down in front of us under the hoofs of the team.

"Sabina was right," I said after a long silence.

"About what?"

"About it being none of your affair."

"I noticed the way they was looking at me too," he said, smiling a little. "Maybe they think I done it."

"They know better than that," I said.

"But they don't like you."

"They don't like me because I follow a plow. They figure that makes a difference." The dulling resentment in his voice had wiped the edge off his smile.

I could understand his bitterness. "They figure it'll make a difference," I said, "when you start to plow under the grass. That's what they're afraid of."

"I ain't of a mind to turn under their grass, but I figure the soil is as much mine to do what I want with as it is theirs."

"It's just that you've got different ideas on what ought to be done with it," I said. "There's plenty to go around. If you don't like the way they figure, how come you was so anxious to help old man Trotter? He's as much against you as anyone else."

Travis turned and spat into the wind. Then he looked right at me. "Doc, I've

got a notion that bullet wasn't meant for Zack Trotter."

"You mean somebody meant it for you."

He nodded. "It could've been that way. Trotter was just riding up on us when we heard the shot and the bullet hit him. We hadn't even seen him till then. The grass was like it is right here. Nearly hides a man on horseback."

"I don't suppose you saw who it was."

"Might have. He was mounted on a gray horse. I seen him getting away and took a couple of shots at him. Seemed as though I hit him once, but I couldn't be sure."

"Lots of men ride gray horses," I said. "That ain't going to help much."

Travis squinted ahead and seemed to think about it for a long time. "Could of been Dick Holcomb," he said after a spell. "I recollect he rides a gray mount he's mighty proud of. Looked like him too."

I considered that. Dick Holcomb had never struck me as a killer, but I figured him as likely as anyone to take a shot at Travis. Holcomb had no more charity for nesters than any other cattleman, and Travis had been more of a thorn in his side than in anyone else's. But there was no use jumping to conclusions and I told Travis that.

"I just don't want to see no one getting killed on my account," he said.

"It's someone else's fight," I said. "You'd best stay out of it."

"But suppose that shot *was* aimed at me?" he insisted.

"You've got no proof that it was," I told him. "Until you have you've got no beef. Just leave it that way."

He didn't say any more the rest of the way into town. I got to thinking then of the time I first saw the Johnsons, about five years before. Travis hadn't changed much since then. He still wore the same faded overalls and big shoes that were so alien to our part of the country; he still had that big shock of sandy hair and those honest eyes that looked square at you, unwavering and bright as a mid-summer sky. Oh, Travis had aged some, all right. There had been some mighty lean years for the Johnsons and there wasn't any year in the Territory that was kind to a man.

I figured the Johnsons had weathered those years as well as any one might. There had been the time his new fence was pulled

out and his first crop trampled over by hungry range cattle; and the time his barn burnt down—accidental or otherwise, it had never been determined; and then the inevitable childbirth. It hadn't been easy for Sabina but it had brought new hope for them both. And after that it seemed that trouble had raged like a tempest over the Johnson homestead. There were little things like clipped wire fences and poisoned stock and small fires that might break out any time of the day or night.

Nothing you could pin down to any one, mind you. Travis had two close neighbors: Zack Trotter and Dick Holcomb. I didn't hold Zack to be the kind of man to deal with trifles. If he didn't like someone he would run him out and that would be that. But Holcomb was a hard man to figure and he might do anything. There were even rumors that he and old man Trotter hadn't got along so well at times.

I PONDERED on that for a long time, hardly realizing that Travis had pulled up to the 'dobe building that housed my office. The high noon blaze cast hardly a shadow over the dusty street and there was a solemn, ghostly paleness to the gray brick walls that lined its either side. The tie rail in front of Rodrico's bar was vacant and the single street lay empty and silent.

"I've got some good liquor upstairs," I said to Travis.

He hitched the reins around the footbrake. "Don't mind if I do, Doc."

We crawled down and had started through the doorway before we heard the shouts. I stepped back and saw Sabina hurrying down the street, skirts flying over tiny feet that kicked up little puffs of dust as she rushed toward us.

"Don't go up there, Trav!" she yelled. "He's there. I seen him go up. He hid that gray horse in the back and crawled upstairs like he was hurt. He'll be hunting you, Trav, he had a gun with him."

She flew toward her husband, catching him by the arm, trying to pull him from the doorway. He stood there, ignoring her, looking up the dingy stairway like he was a small boy ready to make his first try at climbing it.

I stepped forward and grabbed him by the shoulder. "Don't go up there, son. You wait here and I'll fetch the sheriff."

"I got to go up there," he said stubbornly. "I got to go up there and find out."

"It ain't you're fight," I said. "He'll plug you, sure as hell."

He broke away from Sabina's grasp and started forward. "I got to see."

Sabina turned to me. "Don't let him," she cried. "He'll get killed."

I stepped in front of him but Travis only shoved me aside with a sweep of his long arm. He started walking swiftly up the stairs and we could hear them creak sadly under his big shoes.

I looked back at Sabina helplessly. She fell to the floor, sobbing. There was nothing I could do for either of them. I looked up and saw Travis' wiry outline at the head of the stairway. He turned down the dark hallway that led to my office.

I called to him again but he paid no mind. He disappeared and I could hear his footsteps slowly crossing the rickety floor. I counted them. Travis was a long-legged man and he reached the door before I would have. The latch clicked softly and the door squeaked as it was pushed slowly open.

I waited for the gunfire that was bound to come. Dick Holcomb was up there, knowing that there was only one man who had seen the attempted murder and he would shoot that man on sight. It was kill or be killed for Travis Johnson.

Then the thought came to me and I near froze where I stood. I could see through the doorway out into the street where the team stood with their heads hanging after the long journey. There on the seat of the wagon, its barrel reflecting a bright explosion of light, was Travis' gun.

He'd be killed sure, I thought. I couldn't just stand there and let a man walk quietly into certain death. I turned and ran past Sabina, taking the stairs three at a time, hoping it was not too late and expecting to hear the sound of a gun any moment.

Halfway up the stairs I heard the returning heavy tread against the loose boards. I stopped and looked up. The first thing I saw was those big heavy shoes. Travis was standing there, his arms hanging limp at his sides, his face a blank, impassive mask.

"He's dead up there," Travis said. "My first shot must've got him. He was waiting for you, Doc, but he never made it."

I leaned back against the wall, breathing easier. "You done that for Zack Trotter."

"No. Holcomb's bullet was meant for me." He sat down on the stairs and Sabina rushed up to him, still crying.

"It wasn't," I snapped. "Holcomb meant to murder Zack Trotter, and you'd better remember that. Both of you."

FOR a time I was giving myself odds on the old cowman's chances between life and death. It wasn't the first time Zack Trotter had stopped lead, but he was nigh eighty years old when it happened. At any rate, old Zack wasn't about to die. Maybe he had an inkling as to who it was put that slug in him.

That was what I counted on, anyhow. I knew the old man needed some powerful medicine to pull him out of that death bed and there are some things that are stronger than a doctor's potions.

So I held off telling him anything until the day came several months later when he was able to get up and walk about. By that time, everyone in the country knew what had happened except Zack. I'd made it plain to everyone who saw him that he wasn't to know until the right time came. A live patient speaks considerable better for a doctor's reputation than a dead one.

Zack did what I figured he would. Of course, he was a mite unsteady on his feet

at first, and his worn-down bootheels turned in on him a few times before he could walk real good. But his movements were slow and deliberate when he finally hobbled to the far corner of the room and took his gun belt down from the wall. I smiled as I watched his gnarled old hands hitch it around his waist.

"I suppose you've cleaned and oiled it every day," I said. "You been laid up for six months now. Ain't that time enough for your blood to cool down?"

He walked over to the bed and sat on its edge, breathing hard. "Someone tried to get me. He'll try again."

"No," I said. "Not unless the ghosts of dead men pack real guns."

I watched his eyes narrow slowly in disbelief.

"You won't be needing the gun, Zack. I'll tell you how it happened. You might not like it but I've got to tell you sometime."

I told him the story then, how Travis Johnson had already done his gun-slinging for him. Maybe the old man suspected that bullet might not have been meant for him, but he never said. And no one will ever know whether it was or not.

Anyhow, it was best left unsaid as far as the Johnsons were concerned. For the Johnsons were lonely folks and they needed a friend mighty bad.



January's Novel of the Month

THE LAST FRONTIER

By John Starr

"Peace that is bought with guns, mister—is kept by the dead!"

Two Other Big Novels

THREE GRAVES HAVE I . . .

By Arthur Lawson

THE DEVIL'S GULCH

By Giff Cheshire

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HARD CASH OR HOT LEAD

By
JOHN JO CARPENTER

Folks branded young Joey Munro a plain damned fool for shipping twelve thousand dollars of somebody else's dinero across Texas in a cattle train caboose. But Joey reckoned the money was as good as in the bank—hell, didn't he have a jailbird sitting sixgun guard on the gold?

HE HANDED the draft through the window and said, "I'm Joey Munro. I'll take it in hard money, or as much as I can get. The rest in bills, please."

The teller goggled at the size of it, stared at the kid and said, "Th-there ain't that much hard money in the world! Twelve thousand, seven hundred and twenty dollars! Why don't you just take the draft home and put it in the bank there?"

"Because," Joey said—and he was sharp because he felt a little foolish—"because there's been two banks failed in Chicago in the last week. How do I know this piece of paper would be worth anything when I got home with it?"

His three men, or rather his dad's two men and one he could call his, waited while the bank set out to cash the draft for him. He saw big Duke Dunbar grin slyly behind his mustache when the teller's voice came to them over the manager's partition: "There's a crazy man out here that wants this thing cashed in gold." Joey tried to pay no attention to it, nor did he react when Duke's pal, Wiley Holmes, murmured, "Th' old man would of taken the draft. Now we got to be responsible for all that money all the way home. What comes of puttin' a kid in charge of a man's job."

As it was, he had to take \$5000 of the money in paper. The rest was in gold coin, and it was easier handling it with two men on the satchel.

They carried it down to the station and found they had an hour to wait for the train. Joey asked the new man, George Leaf, if he would stand guard over the satchel.

"I've got a little business to take care of, and I guess this is as good a time as any to take care of it," he said. He turned to Duke and Wiley. "You two have made it as tough on me as you could, ever since

the old man started us out with that train-load of steers. Duke, you been with the family a long time, and I'm not going to remember any of the things you've done on this trip after this moment. But Wiley, you're just a tramp rider my dad hired to do hi work, and you haven't done it. You've got a right to transportation back to Texas, and you'll get it. Would you rather take your licking here or there?"

Wiley spat on his hands. "Here's as good a place as any, you smart-aleck rich man's brat. I been achin' to—"

They closed. It took four and a half minutes for Joey to do what he had been itching to do for two weeks. When he got the job done, Wiley was unconscious on the flat cinder platform. One of his eyes was shut and his mouth was bleeding from a dozen cuts.

Duke looked from the fallen man to Joey, who was sucking his knuckles. "Old Joe ain't going to like this," he said softly. "You ain't satisfied to can Bob Hobart in Little Rock for takin' a drink. You ain't satisfied to hire some no-good that you knowed in jail once. You ain't satisfied to risk your dad's money in cash, and to put a no-good jailbird friend in charge of it. You have to beat up on a man your dad hired. Old Joe won't like it."

"Old Joe," said Young Joe, "never liked anything I ever did. Better forget it, Duke, unless you aim to cross me too."

Duke helped Wiley to his feet and they went back to the front platform, where George Leaf, contemptuous of its value, had made the satchel full of money into a fairly comfortable seat. His eyes went up when he saw Wiley's face. Joey had had a moment or two of apprehension after he fired Bob Hobart back there in Little Rock, on the way up with the year's steer crop. Running

into George on the street had seemed, at the time, something of a blessing. Now that Duke had pointed out how his dad usually felt about things, he was not so sure. He had spent a night in jail in Waxahatchi once, and met George there. Not a very high recommendation, on second thought. Yet George had made a firstclass hand, so far, willing to work, never complaining when he had to turn out in the middle of the night to help rescue a steer that had fallen in the car.

"Oh, well!" Joey shrugged, remembering his dad's impatience, particularly with his own methods and friends. "Mebbe it was a fool stunt changing it all to cash, but

he'd have het up worse if I brought home a draft from a busted bank!"

THE first two-thirds of their journey back was in comparative comfort, on the red-plush seats of a day coach. Then they had to change to the caboose of a freight for the Panhandle trip, since the semi-weekly passenger train had gone the day before.

But for working men, the caboose was more comfortable than the day coach had been. The four shared it with the train crew of three brakemen and conductor. There were bunks, and there was a stove on which they could cook hot meals, and there was the cupola where four men could sit and watch the engine, far ahead, chug

He dived suddenly
for his bedroll



across vast, lonely, silent Texas plains.

Wiley Holmes had not spoken a word to Joey since the beating. Duke, one of his father's oldest hands, was openly sympathetic to Wiley. The two stuck together. When Joey and George were in the cupola, Duke and Wiley staved down in the caboose. If Joey started up the ladder while Duke and Wiley were there, Duke was sure to say, "'Scuse me, Joey, before you come up. I think I'll go down and stretch a while. How about you, Wiley?"

Leaf avoided taking sides, but once he said, "Seems like a rebellion is brewin'. Mebbe you shouldn't of whupped him so hard. You got twelve thousand dollars of your pop's money. If it was me, I'd want all the friends I could get until I delivered that stuff."

There was enough common sense in that to worry Joey, but he shook his head. "The money don't worry me. I got it locked in the conductor's cabinet. Probably Duke will cause trouble when we get home, but I've had trouble with the old man before. I've had almost nothing else. I came home this time only because of my mother. I didn't ask to be put in charge of the train. If the old man thinks he's lettin' me prove myself, he can think again. Duke was his right-hand man for twelve years and Duke can go on bein' his right-hand man. He never did cotton to anything I did, and it just took this trip to prove to me it ain't no use."

George looked troubled. "Sure hate to hear a feller talk that way about his old man."

"You don't know old Joe Munro!"

"Heered of him. Never occasioned to run into him, thank the Lord. Pretty well fixed, ain't he? And you an only kid! Don't seem sensible you shouldn't try to get along, with a chancet to heir all that money."

Joey said what his father could do with the money.

In a sense, he had looked forward to "proving" himself on this trip. He was a first-class man, a top hand at anything there was to be done about the place. He had always thought he had a little business judgment, too. But he had never had a chance to show his father any of these talents. No one had ever been able to show Joe Munro anything. Duke Dunbar's attitude since the fight with Wiley Holmes

had almost pushed Joey over the edge.

"When a hired hand can count on my old man takin' sides against me," he said to George, "then there's no use tryin'. I'll hand him this satchel with one hand and grab my soogan with the other." He cocked his worn boots up on the swaying bunk and looked morosely out of the window. "And Duke can count on it! Whatever I do, I'm wrong. If I'd let Bob Hobart stay drunk all the way to Chicago, that would have been wrong. I fired him, and that'll be wrong. If I hadn't hired somebody to take his place, that would be wrong. I hired you, and that'll be wrong."

"Shore heats me!" George said, unhappily. "My old man, mebbe he didn't amount to much. I'll tell you the truth, Joey, he was just a sheep-shearer, and they was seven of us. But it was a sight of trouble when we lost him. Laugh! My old man, he'd laugh at the devil himself. Wisht I could hear the old man laugh now."

They felt the train come to a stop. Wiley and Duke were up in the cupola. As motion ceased, they clambered down. A brakeman passed the caboose, and Duke asked how long they would be here.

"Ten minutes, maybe," the brakie said. "We got to take a siding for a passenger train."

"I thought the passenger had already gone," Duke said idly.

The brakeman grinned. "They come and they go. Mebbe this is one of last week's trains caught up with us. What do you think this is, a time-table line?"

He went on about his business. Duke and Wiley climbed out, and Joey saw them walking up the track beside the train. It was not really a town here—just a telegraph station, a water tower, two or three houses, and a siding with loading corrals and chutes. He dozed.

He was awakened by Duke Dunbar shaking him roughly. He looked outside, and could not tell how much time had passed, but they were still standing on the siding.

"Wiley allows he'll leave you here," Duke said. "He wants to take the passenger train, and you can't blame him. He don't want to talk to you, and you can't blame him for that, either. Wants you to pay him off now. Hurry, Joey, because you could hear that passenger several minutes

ago. Wiley's anxious to get the hell away."

Joey, still angry, had no disposition to be accomodating to Wiley Holmes. He could require Wiley to stay with the train until they reached New Natchez, but what good would it do? He knew to a cent how much he—rather, his father—owed Wiley, because he had been as anxious as Wiley to pay him off. He dug down in his pocket for what was left of the expense money and handed it to Duke.

Without a word of thanks, Duke went out. Joey had a hunch he would not be back, that he would take the passenger, too, and get to Old Joe first with his story. The passenger train raced in and stopped just long enough to take on water. When it pulled out, Duke was still standing there. The freight train whistled, and in a few moments it was following the vanishing passenger. Duke caught the caboose and clumped down the aisle without a word.

NIGHT fell, and they slept. The train chugged on. It was nearly midnight when Joey awakened. He had gone to sleep in his clothing, removing only his boots. It was a draft of cold air on his damp sock feet, he thought, that awakened him. He raised himself quietly on his elbow and looked around.

The rear door of the caboose stood open, and he could see the rays of red light shining dimly from the lanterns on either side. Across the aisle the conductor snored, and beyond him, feet to feet with him, lay George Leaf. Duke Dunbar's bunk was empty. From where he lay, Joey could look up into the cupola. It, too, was empty.

He lay down and slept again, and he would have forgotten the incident completely except that the next thing he knew the conductor had him by the shoulder, shaking him.

"Hey, boy! Wake up, boy, and be quiet!"

Joey sat up. The conductor, in his sock feet, was standing in the aisle with a turned-down lantern in his hand. "Did you take the money out of the locker?"

A cold chill went over Joey. He threw back his blanket and sat up. "No."

"I thought 'twasn't you, because the steeple was pulled and the hasp twisted. You could of got it any time you wanted it. Look!"

Joey had visions of his father's wrath,

and for the moment he was not the cocksure kid he had always been. Like a four-year-old caught in a naughty act, he quailed from the wrath to come. Worse than the old man's rage would be Duke Dunbar's overbearing glee.

By the light of the lantern they examined the locker frantically, as though the satchel full of gold and baled bills could be lost inside it somewhere! No, it was empty—the forced lock was advance warning that there was nothing "mislaidd." Joey slipped on his boots and fished in his roll for his gun. He had not worn it for months, not since he came home after receiving that pitifully lonesome letter from his mother. A gun was a tool, not a weapon, on his dad's place. Guns were used to kill rattlesnakes and crippled cattle and coyotes, and everybody but Joey carried one. But, because he had been in trouble once for waving his threateningly at a man, his father had forbidden him ever to wear it again.

He could see his dad's grim face as he buckled the gun around him. He could remember that moment a little earlier in the night, when he had been awakened by a cold draft from an open door. And when he went down to the dark end of the car, near the stove, a voice came to him sharply from the darkness.

"What's the matter? Who's there?"

It was Duke Dunbar's voice, and it stopped him short. He stood there uncertainly a moment, and let the gun slip back into his holster. The last person in the world he expected to see was Duke. Until this split-second, he had been morally sure that it was Duke who took the satchel, dropping off the train with it in the middle of the night. But Duke was here!

Wiley? But Wiley had gone on ahead, on the passenger train. Joey's heart fell. To Duke he said, "Some trouble. Keep quiet a minute and let's see what happens." He signaled the conductor to bring the lantern closer.

He went to George Leaf's bunk and looked down. Either the man was asleep or he was a marvelous actor. George was not the kind of man to cheer a sober, industrious old man's heart, but he was a good companion even in jail, and he had the light-hearted touch in everything he did, usually. Women liked him. Yet, as

Joey looked down into the sleeping man's face, with his hand on the butt of his .45, he had to confess that there was not much there to reassure Old Joe Munro. To trust a man like that, wearing a patched shirt like that, and dirty underwear like George's, around twelve thousand, seven hundred and twenty dollars!

Not even the light seemed to bother him, and that in itself was suspicious. Joey poked him sharply and said, "Wake up, George!"

GEORGE said, "Hah?" and sat up, blinking. His eyes fell on Joey's gun before they were half open. He frowned and gasped and looked at once toward the end of the car where the money had been. It was too dark to make out details of the forced lock; Joey wished it could have been visible, so he could see the expression on George's face.

"The money's gone."

"Gone?"

"Gone. We're going to have to search the caboose. Conductor, I guess it'll be all right with your men? Well, let's stop the train."

The conductor protested stopping the train, but Joey, his nervous tension for the moment getting the best of him, dropped his hand to his gun again and said, "Do as I say! My old man owns half your damned railroad's bonds!" The conductor pulled the cord. In a moment the train stopped.

Two of the brakemen, sleeping in the caboose in the same end with Duke Dunbar, came awake the moment they heard the air hiss. The other, the conductor said, was riding on top of a car in the middle of the train.

"So you lost your old man's money, did you?" Duke said.

Joey had trouble meeting his eyes. Joey was twenty, and Duke was thirty or better. There was forty pounds difference in their weight, and behind Duke stood the ferocious specter of Old Man Munro.

"I'll find it," Joey said, without much conviction.

"Maybe you will," Duke returned, "and maybe you won't, and anyway you got everybody in trouble no matter what happens. You don't need to look at me, kid. I was workin' like a dog for your old man

when you was ridin' around the country Lord knows where, getting into Lord knows what scrapes. And this is—"

"Let the kid alone," George interrupted, apologetically.

He staggered back as Duke drove a short, hard left into his belly through the dark. George caved in on the bunk, choking for breath, his face contorted with agony.

"Search the damned train!" Duke yelled. "Take my stuff first. Or take *his* stuff first. But don't think you're going to open your mouth to me again, Leaf."

He reached for another lantern and lighted it, and just then the brakeman came back from the middle of the train and joined his two co-workers. One of them told him, briefly, what the trouble was. Joey, feeling sick, dismissed them with a shrug. Opportunity? He supposed they had as much as any, but deep down inside him he was sure that he had brought his trouble on the train with him.

"The money was lost before they ever saw it, if they saw it at all," he said to himself. "And if it's not found, they'll always be under suspicion, and so will every man jack of us on the train."

Guilt is a funny thing. Joey felt almost as though he had taken the money himself as he looked across Duke Dunbar's head at the three worried brakemen. Somewhere he had done something wrong, and it had started a chain of events that led to this. Was it when he fired Bob Hobart? Was it when he hired George Leaf? Was it when he insisted upon cash? Or was it when he fought Wiley Holmes, and whipped him, and set afire the enmity that had been only smoldering until then? Or had he done *everything* wrong?

"Well, are you going to search my stuff?" Duke challenged him.

"We'll search the whole train," Joey said quietly.

It took them three hours to do it, and by then daylight had risen over the rolling Panhandle plains. There were eight cars on the train, an engine, tender and caboose. There was not an inch that was not ransacked, from the journal bearings to the spaces under the catwalk on top of the cars. They moved down the train like a swarm of ants, and no one could have found anything—or passed it—without being observed by the next man, who was searching

an arm's length away. That was impossible.

Counting the engineer, fireman and the rest of the train crew, there were nine men, and by the time they searched up to the pilot of the engine, and searched back to the caboose again, there was not one man who did not suspect everyone else, Joey thought. The old conductor was near collapse with worry. He leaned against the side of the caboose, staring off at the red sun, shaking his gray head.

"Nothing like this ever happened before on my train," he repeated over and over.

George Leaf, his usually merry face white and drawn, came down the steps with a tin cup full of steaming, black coffee in his hand.

"Drink this," he said. "I just boiled some up. Nothing beats a cup of hot coffee when you're skinned. This'll put hair on your ribs, pop. When I make coffee, I throw in a handful of grounds and a horseshoe. When the horseshoe floats, it's done."

"You talk too much, cowboy," Duke said.

Leaf handed the brakeman the coffee, and the brakeman gave it to the conductor, and Leaf stepped away from the caboose where he had better footing.

"Some others I know have that failin' pretty bad," he said. Duke was chewing on a match. He spat out all the particles and moved a slow step toward Leaf, waiting for him to go on. "The old man's all beat up over this," George went ahead. "He'll likely lose his job for it, and it ain't his fault. If I can buck him up a mite, I aim to do it. Would you like to play my bass?"

Grinning, Duke moved in on him. George went white again, but he stood his ground. By his stance it was plain he could box, but

he was not yet over that blow in the belly and he was no match for Duke anyway.

Before he knew what he was doing, Joey had stepped the three paces that separated them and shoved his gun in Duke's side.

"Get back on the car. You're still working for the Munro ranch, and I'm in charge. Conductor, wave her up."

THEY got back in the caboose. The train started, and Duke paused beside Joey and said, "Mebbe you just went crazy with the big head when your old man put you in charge, but, Joey, I'm going to mash your face in if you pull that gun on me again."

Joey shrugged and looked away, and Duke went on down the aisle to his bunk. The three brakemen remained together, and no one went down the train, and Joey knew why. The first man to leave, even to do his duty, would be instantly suspect—or think he was. And so they stayed there in a cluster, and the train puffed on.

George Leaf was lying on his bunk, staring up at nothing and smoking a cigarette. His coffee had made the old conductor feel better. He came up and sat down beside George and said so, and George made some brief, nervous, worried remark. The conductor turned to Joey.

"Shenango's a county seat. We can stop there and report this to the sheriff. It's not very far ahead," he said.

"Shenango!"

The exclamation came from Duke, at the other end of the car. Joey looked at him closely, and it suddenly occurred to him that he had not been quite square with Duke. He was bull-headed, and he was sly, but he had never been anything but loyal to



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the Munro interests. A man could be bull-headed and sly, and still be concerned because his boss had lost twelve thousand, seven hundred and twenty dollars. Particularly, that man could be concerned when he was in the right, and anxious to get back home and prove it.

Joey forced himself to be civil. "Yeah, Shenango. She sure goes slow. That's the last county seat before we get home." He had to force himself to go on, too. "And I'm just as satisfied to tell it to a strange sheriff! Our sheriff never had too high an opinion of me, either."

"You mean—we ain't even to Shenango yet?" Duke said in a baffled, angry tone.

"We had to wait for that passenger," the conductor explained, "and we lost some time searchin' back there, and we ain't been movin' very fast anyhow. Why, we didn't get through Whipple Junction until around midnight."

"I was awake about then," Joey said, making conversation. "Never have seen Whipple. Wish I'd—"

He broke off suddenly, wondering what was wrong, what was nagging at the back of his mind, and why this town of Whipple was suddenly so important. Quickly he counted them—no, they were all here, no one had gotten off at Whipple. He met George Leaf's eyes. George was haggard. He licked his lips.

"Pr-pretty lively town on a Saturday night, Whipple is," George murmured, apparently just making talk. "I worked in a horse market there a couple of weeks, three-four years ago."

Whipple Junction . . . Three Forks . . . Shenango . . . Gomez . . . Mujer Loco . . . Munro Junction. . .

Joey stood up and lifted his gun out of its holster.

"Wait a minute! Maybe I've got it! Wiley Holmes used to work around Shenango. You don't know the town very well, do you, Duke?"

Duke stood up. His big, powerful frame filled the aisle.

"I told you not to play with that gun around me," he said thickly. "I don't care if you are a Munro, one more fool play from you and I'll kill you."

He dived suddenly for his bedroll, and Joey yelled and jerked the gun up and pulled back on the trigger, and a .45 slug

smashed into the caboose siding not three inches from Duke's head. George Leaf whooped and threw himself toward his own soogans and clawed frantically for his gun. Duke turned around, his face contorted with hatred, his big ham of a hand still hovering over his roll. The three brakemen had vanished out the front door of the caboose, climbing up the swaying ladders like monkeys.

Joey squeezed the trigger again and drove Duke back. He could hear George Leaf behind him.

"Get down on your hands and knees so you're out of range, and creep down there and get his gun, George," he said. To Duke he said, "I wouldn't try it, Duke, I wouldn't try it. You've had two for warning. The next time I'll kill you."

"Even if you are a Munro—" Duke began.

Joey shook his head. "No, I wouldn't swing for it, even if I *wasn't* a Munro. Because you stole the money, Duke."

George was half way down the aisle. He threw a questioning glance backward, but Joey signaled him on with a wave of the gun. George got Duke's .45 out of his roll and scuttled back with it.

"Yes, you and Wiley, and I'm going to get it back," Joey went on. It was all straight in his mind now, and he laughed at George's protesting frown. "Yes, I know the money was still in the caboose when Wiley left. This was one of those schemes cooked up in a hurry, and it would have worked fine except for one or two things. Duke, you don't need to argue about it, because you can't throw twelve thousand dollars out in a strange town and not get it talked about."

He risked taking his eyes from Duke to look at George. "You and I were clay pigeons to be suspects, George. Here are the questions the law would have asked me—and you. Why did I fire Bob Hobart? How did you just 'happen' to be in Little Rock at the time? Didn't we meet in jail, anyway? Why did I pick that fight with Wiley and leave you in charge of the money, instead of Duke? Why did I have it changed to cash in the first place? Those would have been damned hard to answer!"

"I've got some more for you to answer," Duke said. "Your old man will have a few, too."

Joey could see Duke's bravado coming back. He could be trusted with a gun now, because he wouldn't be fool enough to make things worse by shooting. Duke was thinking fast, he was banking on Old Joe Munro's trust in him. He had given up the money, but he was fighting to clear himself. He had nerve, Duke Dunbar did.

"I haven't got any questions," Joey said. "I know what happened. I know why Wiley left the train ahead of time—so he could grab that fast passenger that went around us! He didn't buy a ticket all the way to Munro Junction, either, we'll find. *He got off at Shenango*, and he's up ahead there now, chewing his nails and worrying and wondering what happened.

"Because we were *supposed* to get into Munro Junction around daylight. We were *supposed* to go through Shenango about midnight. That's when you broke open the locker and threw the money out—only it was Whipple we were going through, and not Shenango. Where you boys slipped was in reading the time-table. Don't you know that trains never run on time in Texas?"

Duke started to say, "You can't prove anything of that—" and he did mumble something that sounded like that. Then he lost his head and lunged down the aisle, and Joey would have had to shoot him except for the quick thinking of the conductor. The old man grabbed the brake cord and whistled for a quick stop. Up ahead, the engineer, already nervous, jerked back on his brake valve and every wheel locked.

Duke went over backward and the same momentum carried Joey and George Leaf forward, and they lit on the big man and did not get up quickly.

THEY were a day late getting into Munro Junction, because they left the train in the middle of the range, unloaded their horses and rode back to Whipple Junction. The conductor, trusted to notify the authorities in Shenango, had been as good as his word. They picked up the satchel full of money in Whipple. It had been found by two little Mexican boys and carried to the town marshal, who was near prostration with excitement.

They tied the satchel on behind Duke's

saddle, and in Shenango they picked up two deputy sheriffs and Wiley Holmes, already a prisoner. It was almost evening when they rode into Munro Junction. From here it was three miles to the ranch. The junction consisted of a loading chute and corral, a store, two houses and a blacksmith shop.

Joey's heart sank as he saw his father stalk out of the store. They were about the same size, but the old man was heavier, and he had brittle, cold blue eyes and a heavy fist. Joey avoided those eyes. He went over to Duke's saddle and took off the satchel of money and pitched it. It landed with a thud at his father's feet.

"We had some trouble—" Joey began.

The old man cut in sharply with, "I heard all about it. I can't trust you out of my sight a minute. You're a fool wild kid and you always will be a fool wild kid that can't be trusted to bring a dime's worth of chewin' tobacco from the store."

Joey winced; at seventeen, he had been sent in for a dime's worth of chewin', and due to a slight altercation in town, had been four days getting back.

His own wrath rose, and it might have boiled over, except that he noticed a small yellow paper lying on the plank sidewalk. It had fallen out of his father's vest pocket and the old man, in his anger, had not noticed it. Joey picked it up. His father grabbed at it, but Joey had time to read the signature of the Chicago broker who had bought the steers, and this much of the text of the wire:

ADVISE QUICK LEGAL ACTION ENFORCE
DRAFT THROUGH RECEIVERS AS CHICAGO
CATTLEMAN'S BANK CLOSED ITS DOORS THIS
MORNING AND CANNOT MEET DEMANDS OF
DEPOSITORS STOP LOOKS LIKE THEY WON'T
PAY TWENTY CENTS ON THE—

Joey handed the telegram to his father. "As I started to say, pop, we had a little trouble." He kicked the satchel. "But we pay off a hundred cents on the dollar when we get here."

Old Joe's blue eyes did not soften, and he did not put out his hand, but from what he said, Joey knew there would never be any more serious trouble between them.

"Is that jailbird pardner of yours a big eater? Because your mother's got the goldangdest pie baked you ever saw. Get on home afore I take a tug to you!"

Sam Cary, tough-luck construction boss, brought his beloved steel streaks of rust forty-eight stinking, sweating railroad miles, to the Onion Creek trestle . . . where waited, grim and gray as Death, the only power that can lick a fighting man —who won't be licked. . . .



STEEL TRAIL DEADLINE

A Novelette

By FRANK BONHAM

It was Mattis who took
Sam's first and second
shots



CHAPTER ONE

Deadline

AT SEVEN o'clock that morning the work train from the railroad camp south of Gilmer's Ferry pushed a string of flats into town. One car was

loaded with rails and fittings and two others were thronged with workmen. The train stopped near the end of the rails, a few hundred yards short of the trestle which spanned Onion Creek, the workmen piling off the cars while Sam Cary, the superintendent, came from the locomotive with a roll of plans under his arm.

It was June and the air was still cool and fresh; an amber light was over the village, touching the wet feather of vapor that rose from the steam-dome of the little work engine. The sun was on Cary's face as he lined the men up. He was a stocky,

vigorous man of thirty with no foolishness about him.

He looked over the crew of sixty-five men. "Clancy," he said, abruptly, "get that look out of your eye. I'll can any man who gets into a scrap. Montez, what've you got up your sleeve?"

A short, mustached Mexican let a truncated axe-helve drop from his blue shirt-sleeve to the ground. He touched his forehead with his finger-tips. "*Dispénseme, patrón—*"

Cary made a settling motion with his shoulders and knocked the ash off his cigar. "*Bueno*. Now, then, I'm going to talk to Gilmer again and try to get his blessing on this job. But either way, we're going to camp on the north side of the creek tonight. I've established beer rations at the cantina for you. Stay there till you hear from me. Shanley," he said, "keep an eye on them."

Shanley, his work-boss, didn't take his displeased eye off the now slightly hang-dog work crew. "Bet I won't," he said.

Sam Cary crossed the tracks and headed down the street, which sloped between white and brown adobe buildings and a few false-front stores to the wide wash of Onion Creek, a placid rivulet traversing sand and willows. He walked with casualness in the massive swing of his shoulders. It was at variance to the uncertainty that had kept him from eating any breakfast this morning. He was aware that he was young for a job like this, even though the road he was building was one nobody would ever hear of outside the trade. But to him, as a first job, as a lever to bigger things, it was as serious as the Central Pacific.

He had brought those beloved streaks of rust forty-eight miles, had placed many a tie with his own hands; each mile of it was ballasted with a peculiar type of crushed rock he secretly called the "Cary ballast." It was going to be a gem of a mountain road; he had located each yard of it himself and his name was going to be on the final report.

He had been a plow-hand on a Missouri farm the day he first smelled wood-smoke belching from the diamond stack of a work engine. After he got a lungful of that perfume he knew he would never stumble down a furrow again. He got a job on a grading gang, finally made the location crew.

He had the good fortune to work under Red Mike O'Toole, the Paul Bunyan of southwestern railroading. O'Toole uncovered the boy's gift for road-building. Something in Cary responded to a smooth plane, but it soured his disposition to see kinks put in good rails or to be a party to laying ties up a too-abrupt grade.

After O'Toole, he was on the Eureka & Palisade, in Nevada, and some other roads no one but a rust-eater knew existed. But at last Cary realized that, though he could go on carrying chain for the big boss the rest of his life, he would never build his own road unless he got busy.

Sam made a tour of the Arizona mining country and found a section that needed a road. It was between Safford and Mountain City, where the asbestos mines still sent their ore out by wagon. Better yet, there were several small towns between the termini to help support a road. Cary could talk as well as work. He talked C. C. Boone, of the Arizona Central, into building one more spur from his mother line, to worm like a feeder root into the hills to tap the gravy. Boone put him on a pauper's budget to build the Safford & Mountain City.

Maybe Cary wore his derby a little farther back on his head, now. But it was all part of a campaign to persuade himself that his luck would hold. And until he reached Gilmer's Ferry, he had thought it was going to. . . .

BEFORE he reached the foot of the street a stage splashed through the shallows of the creek and rocked into the yard of the stage and freight company across the street from the ferry building. Cary was aware that Abe Sullivan, who operated the line, was not unfriendly with Gilmer, the ferryman, who was distinctly unfriendly with Sam.

Gilmer's place was a big, flat-roofed building of eroded adobe bricks, with a porch where Gus Gilmer sat, and had sat for years, in a clumsy wheel chair. For years he had charged a dollar a head for each man and animal he ferried across the creek at flood time, or allowed to ford in the dry season. Inside the building he sold general merchandise. The building was perfectly plain except for some antlers nailed over the door and strings of dusty

chilis hanging on the wall between the windows.

Cary went up with his roll of plans under his arm and nodded to the old man, the girl and the faintly-smiling man of forty who was with them. This was Abe Sullivan, the freighter. "Morning," Cary said.

Sullivan said "Howdy." The girl, who was Gilmer's daughter, smiled. Gilmer spat over the railing.

Cary leaned against the railing. "Mr. Gilmer," he said, "I thought I'd have another talk with you about things."

Gilmer had no teeth and balked at plates; when he spoke, his face seemed to cave in, and he spat and lisped and was almost unintelligible. "Did you?" he snapped.

"I want to say that I don't want to hurt anybody. If you're opposed to the railroad because it will hurt Mr. Sullivan's business, I'd like to point out that—"

"Go to hell!" Gus Gilmer said. His arthritic hands rubbed the wooden wheels of his chair. He was a dehydrated relic of the pioneer who had settled here twenty years ago.

Unperturbed, Cary frowned at him. "Sullivan," he continued, "serves eleven towns besides Mountain City. Only three of them will be within reach of my railroad. All those towns are freight-hungry and there's enough business for both of us—providing he gets his rates down."

Sullivan took his pipe out of his mouth and frowned at it; then he replaced it. He glanced sidewise at Cary. He said nothing.

Cary's ire began to be touched. "But that's beside the point. All we need to think about is that I'm trying to do a job that will help the country you pioneered come out of the wilderness. Railroads are all that will ever make a state out of Arizona. Doesn't that mean anything to you?"

Gilmer turned his eyes, the hue of gray slate, onto the railroad man. "Yes," he said. "It makes me want to get drunk and stay that way the rest of my life. I hate the stink of train smoke. I hate the Spiks and Micks that build your damned roads, and I hate the men like you who plan them."

"But you can't stop them," Cary retorted. "And you might as well sell me right-of-way because I'm going to have it anyway. I'm not so sure anybody can claim a watercourse and keep other people from building a bridge across it, and I'm willing

to go to court to test it . . . after I build the railroad."

This was a lie. The one thing Sam Cary feared was being hung up by a legal battle which would scare old C. C. Boone out.

A flush showed under Gilmer's taut skin. His hand came from under the Mexican blanket across his lap and it held a huge off-breed cap-and-ball pistol. Kitty Gilmer uttered a little yelp and came up out of her chair. "Cary," Gilmer said, "I'd sooner kill you than not. In a quarter of a minute I'm going to fire this thing. Get off the porch!"

Cary picked up his roll of plans. There was no answer for such a gesture, and he made none. He faced the girl. "I'd like to buy some cigars, if you'll sell me some."

"Get out!" Gilmer cried in his watery voice.

Kitty tucked the hand with the gun back under the blanket. "Don't be silly, pop. His money's as good as anybody's."

Within the building it was dark, fragrant of hams, coffee and tobacco. The girl walked ahead of Cary to a counter. She was tall and dark-haired, with slender legs and a graceful way of using her body when she walked. She reached the counter, turned her back to it and leaned against it.

"Now, what did you want to talk to me about?"

"Same thing. I hate having to do this. But it's got to come some time, and it's going to come now, because I'll never get another chance to build a railroad if it doesn't."

"That's no reason," Kitty Gilmer said.

"It's my reason. I've been fair, and there's no reason why I should suffer because an old man hates to see the passing of the horse. I've offered him more for the right-of-way than he'll ever make operating the ferry; and he can still collect toll besides."

The girl's eyes looked dark, though in the sunlight they had been a soft blue-gray. They were steady and intelligent and, Cary thought, rather sad. They studied him for a while and then she said, "You know, he won't live much longer, don't you, Mr. Cary? Why not let him finish his days in peace?"

"I hope he lives another eighty years," Cary said. "But even one year of that would finish me. I've got no choice. I thought maybe you could explain the sit-

uation to him, since he won't let me talk. Make him understand that I'm a pioneer too, in a way."

She smiled. "Not in *his* way! I can promise you that when he's gone there won't be anything to block you. But that's all I can promise."

Cary thought, "You make murder mighty inviting, Miss Kitty;" but he wisely kept his silence. "Well," he said, "let me have a dozen cigars, anyway."

When she handed them to him, their fingers touched; hers were smooth and cool, and they made his throat tighten. Women were something he had never had time for, and now that he was going someplace he was afraid they might slow him down. But there was no denying they were a pleasant subject for conjecture.

"Like it here, Kitty?" he asked.

She shrugged. "It's a little burg; but having the ferry we meet so many people it's almost like living in a city."

"Then why don't you get him to sell out and go live in a city?"

"Because I don't like cities." She laughed softly at his expression as he realized finally she was not an avenue to the kings row.

CHAPTER TWO

Sawdust Trail

CARY left the store with the unhappy knowledge that he could not buy his way across Onion Creek. He would have to butt his way across with the same methods he had used in the railroad business so far. He had a shamefaced respect for Gilmer, however, which made it unpleasant to think of overriding him. And he remembered the way he had pulled out that horse pistol.

As he passed the offices of the Mountain Freight Line, there was an unwontedly large force hanging about, for a way-station. Sullivan's headquarters were in Safford. He thought he understood why they were here. Sullivan, in fighting Gilmer's battle, would be fighting his own.

Cary stood in the shade of a live oak in the middle of the street and looked at the trestle marching leanly across the sandy wash a quarter-mile out of town. Not far above the trestle, the bluffs began. They piled into foothills farther on, and behind

the foothills were mountains. That was why the road had to cross here. Because Cary had crawled over those mountains with chain and transit for six months, and he was persuaded that the only way a two-six-o would ever get to Mountain City was through Mineral Canyon.

He walked up the hill to the Cantina Montezuma and parted the doors with his hands. The men were drinking noisily but peaceably. Cary shouted, "Work train! Grab your picks!"

He heard Shanley getting them together as he went back to the train.

The raw end of yesterday's iron was a hundred yards short of the trestle. Cary stood on the cow-catcher watching the teams go to work. Rail buckers swung the rails down, gaugers spotted the iron, spikers sank their spikes in three ringing blows. The work train budged forward another dozen feet.

They passed the rear of Gilmer's trading post. Rails went down on the apron of trestle. The first flat-car inched out on the longest bridge Sam Cary had ever built.

Two men walked from the back of the trading post. One was Abe Sullivan. The other man Sam did not recognize. They walked up the creek-bank and stood by the tracks, watching the work. Sullivan wore his flat, raw-edged Stetson on the back of his head and his thumbs were tucked under his belt. A tall, well-made man, he carried his weight above the belt, and he had hips as slender as a cowboy's.

Cary walked back to them. Sullivan said, "You don't know Gus Gilmer very well, Cary. You wouldn't be standing here like a bottle on a stump, if you did. He might be at one of those windows with a .45-70."

"Well, it's four hundred yards, if he is."

Sullivan's face was large, yellow-brown and slightly pocked. He had a heavy mouth with humor but without sympathy, and thoughtful black eyes. "There's easier ways to do this," he said.

"I haven't found any," Cary told him. He glanced at the big, pallid man with the freighter, and Sullivan said quickly, "You don't know my partner, Cary—Read Mattis."

They shook hands without much enthusiasm on either's part. Mattis was in his late thirties, a sober, bony-faced man better

dressed than his partner and with sharp, steady eyes.

"So you're bound to build a railroad," he smiled.

"I don't intend to quit this side of Mountain City. But if there's an easier way to do it than laying one tie down beyond another, I'd like to know about it."

Sullivan took a plug of navy from his pocket, dusted it on his shirt and offered it to Sam. When Sam declined, he took a chew and began to work it up. "Just as soon Gus didn't see us talking," he said.

Cary led them to the other side of the locomotive and climbed to the toe-path above the drivers. They sat on the plank with their backs to the brass-banded boiler-jacket.

"We've got sixteen thousand dollars invested in wagons, stage coaches and stock," Mattis said, as if he were reading from an inventory, "and our payroll runs two thousand dollars a month."

Unimpressed, Cary rolled a cigar between his hands. "At seventy-five dollars a ton for freight, you've probably paid off that investment thirty times since you went into business."

"It's still the way we make our living, and we ain't ready to retire!" Mattis snapped. "I've been over your line and seen where you pounded your stakes. You go through Rock Springs, Cokeville and Lingle, the three biggest way-points on our line. What are you going to charge?"

"Twenty-five or thirty a ton. You can meet it."

"We don't want to meet it. How much would it cost us to have those stakes moved?"

Cary eyed him coldly. "A lot."

Sullivan came in sharply. "All right. We'll pay a lot. Cary, what if you laid the tracks down two miles from each of those towns? They'd have to get their freight to and from the railroad, and I'd probably be persuaded to make a short-line charge to move it. That wouldn't hurt you, they'd soon get used to it and it would keep us in business." He transferred his attention to the workers on the trestle and said, so quietly Sam hardly heard him, "You'd come out of it kind of prosperous, too, Sam."

Sam put his hand on the freighter's shoulder in what might have been comradely fashion. Then he gave him a shove that boosted him off the catwalk onto the ground. Sullivan turned swiftly with anger in his eyes and took a step toward Cary. Mattis said, "Abe!" and Sullivan stopped and gave his shoulders a shrug under the black coat he wore. He spat on the ground and listened to Sam say, "Great idea, boys. It wouldn't hurt anybody but the customers. But they are some of the people I hope to benefit with this road. A deal ain't a deal unless everybody profits."

Sullivan's reaction was contempt. He told Sam, "You're using the wrong materials on this railroad, Cary. You ought to be spreading a sawdust trail instead of steel. And then you need an altar at the end, instead of a roundhouse, where you can make your little sermons on brotherly love. . ."

They left.

SAM went forward to supervise the gauging. Rails had been carried half-way across the trestle. The grading and ballasting gangs had gone ahead to start

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chipping a trail along the side of Mineral Canyon, above the freight road. But he kept holding his breath, unwilling to accept the proposition that old Gus Gilmer would let his boast be overridden so easily.

He was dissatisfied with the placement of a rail and had the panting locomotive with its brass steam-dome and sand-box and its sweating dark-blue boiler jacket backed off the trestle. He had the spikes pulled and saw Shanley's eyes grumbling over the tacit disapproval of his work. Shanley was an old ironman from U. P. days. His conversation had a strong polarity for General Dodge.

"You've got to keep your eye on those gandy-dancers, Shan," Sam said. "They'll spread gauge on you every time if you don't stand in their hip-pockets."

Shanley was placated.

Cary, hearing the engine chuff strongly, growled, "Tell that boiler-head I'll let him know when I'm ready."

He bent to the work, but still heard the rush of steam in quick bursts, and suddenly he heard the drivers skid and the couplings crash together. Shanley yelled, "Boss! That ain't Harry in the cab!"

Cary stood up in time to see a man jump from the cab into the willows of the stream-bank. Steam rushed in white bursts from the escapes of the locomotive; the throttle was wide open. The flats went before it like a battering-ram.

Cary yelled, "Clear the trestle!"

There was time for a few workmen to crowd off the trestle on the nearer side, but most of them took off for the far bank along the catwalks. Cary ran up the apron toward the work train as it lurched forward at a bumbling gallop. He let the flat-cars jostle past him onto the trestle and caught a grab-iron as the engine went by. He found himself on his knees on the floor beside another man who lay on his face with his arms reaching along the floor. It was Harry Mawson, the engineer.

Sam felt the shock of the first flat-car passing end-of-track and smashing into the ties. He lugged the engineer over to the ladder and, looking down, saw the drab green heads of mountain shrubs lunging past. He tossed him into a tangle of brush and an instant later there was the hollow rattle of the bridge beneath the cab.

Cary cut the throttle and piled onto the

Johnson bar. There was an ominous crash somewhere and a series of jerks, but the speed did not seem to slacken. Then there was an arresting jolt that flung him against the gauges. He heard a tearing thunder of breaking timbers. He recoiled from heated iron and hauled himself to the door.

Up ahead he saw a flat-car rip through the ties and begin to fall; the timbers held a moment, but the following flat slammed into this car and both of them went into a slow fall to the stream bed twenty-five feet below. The locomotive's speed was down, now, but Cary was afraid to jump to the catwalk. He knew he could not hold it; he would either go over the side or land among the ties. He stayed with the engine.

He felt the impact of the front truck dropping off the last rail onto the ties. There were sounds of released steam within the boiler. He wondered to which side the locomotive would roll, or whether it would plunge headfirst through the hole in the timbering. He got ready to jump, and then the two-six-o slewed sideways and came to a steaming, hissing, paralyzed stop. Cary leaped to the trestle.

Four flat cars lay in the bottom of the wash. The locomotive was teetering but still aloft. But Cary was staring at the splintered section of the bridge; and Shanley, running up just then, heard him breathe, "By God, that was a well-built trestle!"

CHAPTER THREE

Spur-Line Boss

SHANLEY had news. Someone had dragged down the culprit who had slugged Mawson and started the engine onto the trestle. He was lashed to a tie up the tracks a way. Cary went back to interview him. He was a lanky man who needed a clean shirt, a shave and a bath. He lay looking up at the sun with his lips pressed together.

"Who's your boss?" Cary asked.

"I swamp for the saloon."

"Like hell! Is it Gilmer or Sullivan?"

"I swamp for the saloon."

Cary turned to Shanley. "Get me your two best spikers."

He had the man tied lengthwise at the middle of the track across the new, unbalanced ties. Two Mexican workmen came

up with Shanley. "Bring some spikes," Cary said, "and place your bets. I'll lay five bucks that Casoose can sink three spikes by this man's right ear before Mario sinks three by his left. Any takers?"

"That's fool's money," Shanley grinned. "Mario's the fastest spiker I got. Only not so accurate."

Apprehension invaded the captive's features. He lay rigid while the men set their spikes into the ties and, spitting on their hands, awaited the signal to begin.

Cary said, "Go!"

The big-bellied Mexican called Casoose struck his spike first, a solid blow that missed the man's ear by three inches. But the captive's eyes squeezed shut. Mario drove his spike halfway home with one blow. He wound up for the next.

"Look out!" Shanley cautioned. "It won't help none to hurry it and miss."

Mario connected, but the spike leaned sharply and touched the man's ear. He made a queer, babbling cry. "Wait!" he gasped. "I—I work for Abe Sullivan."

Cary glanced at Shanley. "Take this fellow's shirt off and leave him out here a couple of hours. He's pasty. He ought to get out in the sunshine more. He may get a little burn, but it won't be anything to what Mawson would've got from that live steam if I hadn't pitched him out." Cary turned and looked at his men. "Anybody want to go down and help me work over the stage station?" he asked.

It turned out that everybody did.

Gilmer's Ferry had aroused from its torpor. Children were streaking up the wash to look at the wreckage and a few disinterested spectators followed them. But most of the activity seemed to center around the freight office, where a score of men stood about in what was intended for casual conversation. But somehow it was difficult to make a strong-arm gang look like anything but that.

Cary had the men wait across the street from the freight office. He crossed and began to shoulder through the crowd of hostlers, skinners and swappers. A big, blond fellow smelling of stables got in his way. "Looking for somebody?"

"Sullivan," Cary said.

"He ain't here."

"I'll look around, anyway." Saying this, Cary started past. The hostler put out an

arm. It was a big, thick, strong arm.

"Uh-uh," he said.

Sam said, "I think so," and placed his boot firmly on the arch of the other's foot and let his weight down on it. The big, squarish face convulsed. Sam banged him on the bridge of his nose with his own head and put a short, sledge-hammer blow into his belly. At the same time he made a single shrill whistle between his teeth. He heard Shanley and the others begin to run.

He smashed at the hostler's face with his knuckles and hustled him out of the way when he stumbled back. Hands were tearing at him but he went through. He went through standing up, more by the power of a shotgun personality than by force. It was reminiscent of the old days on the grading gang, when there was a fight every Saturday night, and Sam thought nostalgically, "I ought to do more of this."

He was through them and into the office, where Sullivan rose in alarm from his desk. Mattis was with him, and bent quickly to snatch a heavy coil of rope from the floor.

Cary jumped him. The rope came down in a whistling smash at his head, knocked his hat off and all but raked his ear off as it descended on his shoulderblade. It hurt. Mattis shot a fist into Cary's face and as he ducked it slammed him again with the coil of brown manila. Sullivan came into it with a long punch brought up from the bottom drawer of his desk. It hit Sam's already wounded ear and touched off a string of firecrackers in his head.

He could hear them shouting and milling in front of the office. He began to redden. "Sullivan," he said, "you manure-stinking son of—" The big, rock-faced man with the rope swung again. Cary flung up a hand to ward off the rope, and caught it. He gave a yank that pulled Mattis off balance. While he was trying to duck out of the way, Cary clubbed him on the back of the neck with his fist and, when he stumbled, brought a knee up into his face. He went down. Sam stepped over him and went after Sullivan with the rope. . . .

WHEN Shanley came into the office, Sullivan was down on his knees and elbows on the floor, clutching his face with his hands. Blood splattered him, and there was plenty of blood on Cary from his torn ear.

Sam faced Shanley unsteadily. "We'll start here. I don't want two sticks of furniture left together. Then turn out the mules and run them a couple of miles down the wash. After that we'll see if they've got any hard likker left at the saloon."

In the midst of it, someone came into the stable yard to shout, "Old Man Gilmer's fallen in the creek!"

Cary, Shanley and a few others ran down to the foot of the street. Kitty Gilmer was trying to get the old man back into his wheel chair, with the help of some Mexican boys. Cary picked up the lean form and deposited him, sodden wet, in the chair. They hauled it out of the ford. Gilmer, who had been knocked unconscious by the fall, was beginning to come around.

Kitty was white-lipped with anger. "I thank you for this, Sam Cary!" she said. "He saw the fight and wasn't going to be left out of it. But of course he let his chair run away with him when he tried to cross the street and wound up in the creek."

Sam, still bloody, still breathless, but beginning to be amused, grinned. "So I'm at fault because your old man tried to get into somebody else's fight!"

"Somebody *else's*! I don't know when a fight has been any *more* his than that one. He put up half the money to have that man wreck your trestle." Then she gasped and put her hand over her mouth.

Sam nodded gravely. "That makes it his, all right."

He winked at Shanley and started up the street. Kitty stood there with her hands on her hips. In her thin shirtwaist and ankle-length skirt, her blonde hair lying on her shoulders, she was something to make a man look twice. "What are you going to do?" she called.

"Repair the bridge," Cary said. "You didn't think I was going to quit?"

Cary left a guard on the trestle and put the men to work worming the work-engine back on the tracks. He packed some food and clothes and set out for Safford on a hand-car. He spent an hour in a barber shop, being shaved, shorn and having the cuts on his face touched up. From there he went to the Cochise House, where C. C. Boone put up when he was in town. He happened to be in, and in his room dourly poured Scotch for himself and Sam.

He was a small, pot-bellied man who

wore red sleeve garters, suspenders without a belt and brightly polished boots. He had an irascible mouth which was out of character with his disinclination to use it.

He listened to Sam's story. He said nothing. When Sam had finished, he still did not speak. He had a way of handling his cigar gingerly and looking about him as if for a place to throw it, and then replacing it in his mouth. He did this until Sam was ready to shout at him.

Finally C. C. Boone said, "Mr. Cary, I am extremely angry with you. But I have learned something: Never to be argued into a bad investment with a glib tongue. I was already spread out much too thinly for safety. But I let you talk me into starting a new spurline even when I was already losing money on half the lines I now own." He was beginning to heat up; his small, lined face reddened.

Cary hurried to pour another glass of whiskey and put it in his hand. "Mr. Boone, this one will pay for all the rest, if we ever get there! Why, those asbestos mines—"

C. C. Boone said coolly, "Those asbestos mines will probably cease to produce the day we reach Mountain City." He drank half the whiskey and soaked the butt of his cigar in the other half; he chewed on this a while. "Mattis, by the way," he growled, "is one of the bad boys of the railroad business. He's thrown together some of the worst jerk-line roads in the West. And now he wants to do the same for ours. . . ."

Sam thought his position was improving; but Boone shook his head disconsolately. "Any other time, I'd give him his fight. Right now, I'm of a mind to write the whole thing off or sell for what he'll offer. But I'm going to give you one more month to cross Onion Creek and furnish security that the bridge will not be burned every time we turn our backs. Buy Gilmer out somehow. Investigate his title. But don't attempt to go ahead again until you have legal authority to do so."

He took his shirt off and began to prepare for bed, and Cary took the hint and left.

In the morning he visited a lawyer and put down fifty dollars of his own money to have the title to Gus Gilmer's claim on Gilmer's Ferry searched. He spent the day roaming the town and sniffing the smoke of

the railroad yards. Pessimism dogged him everywhere he went; it clouded his liquor. At five o'clock, he went down to the land office and found the lawyer still up to his elbows in maps and records. But he was excited.

A dark-mustached, ruddy man with hair parted and curled like a bartender's, he shook a handful of papers at Cary. "Something wrong here, Mr. Cary, something wrong! Gilmer apparently never acquired that land legally at all! He seems to have settled on it under the Stone and Timber Act, whereas it was actually a sort of tail hanging from an old grant!"

Cary leaned on the counter. "Let's have that again."

The lawyer sketched a chart of the genealogy of the land. "So far as I have discovered," he concluded, "the land rightly belongs to one George Gray Owl. Probably a half-breed. An Indian wouldn't be owning land next door to a reservation. If Gray Owl is dead, it would belong to his heirs and assigns."

He said, "I'll look further, but as far as I can tell now, your business is with Gray Owl, not Gilmer. Providing," he added, "you can find him. . . ."

CHAPTER FOUR

Fine Art of the Double-Cross

SAM CARY spent ten days finding Gray Owl. He located him eventually near Tucson, an old man with a face like a mud-bank who wore his pants below his navel and no shirt. George had a son, a daughter-in-law, and four children living on his corn-patch. Cary had come primed with gifts, a

grant deed and a sack of silver dollars.

But George Gray Owl would not sell, "See land first," he said.

"Not necessary at all!" Sam told him. "I'll give you the money right now, understand? Money, dinero, wampum! Then you can sign the lease."

"See land first," said George Gray Owl.

They rode in a wagon to a branch line of the Arizona Central and pumped a hand-car the rest of the distance to Gilmer's Ferry. The trip took three days and Cary worked on the Indian the entire way.

It was noon of a hot summer day when they arrived at the village. It had now been two weeks since he left, and Cary found the trestle repaired, the flat-cars block-and-tackled back onto the grade, and camp moved up to the bank of the wash. Shanley was waiting for him with bad news.

"Old Man Gilmer's sick, Sam. Sicker'n a kitten."

Cary's first natural reaction was pleasure. *I can promise that when he's gone I won't stand in your way.* Kitty had said that, but of course that was before the late ruckus.

"What's the matter with him?" he asked.

"Pneumony. He took cold from that dousing in the creek. It got worse, and now they think it's in his lungs. But that ain't the worst," he said. "Gilmer gave Abe Sullivan a ninety-nine-year lease on the ferry the day you left." He shook his head. "They've got us by the short hairs, Sam."

Sam said, "Yeah? I've got a couple of aces to play, too."

Shanley frowned at the Indians. "You mean *them*?"

"I mean them. The old man's the legal



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owner of Gilmer's Ferry. What about that?"

He took the Indians up to the trading post. Some children were fighting in the hot dust before the long adobe building. The door opened and Kitty came out. "You kids are going to have to quit that yelling, or I'll give you a shotgun barrel full of rock salt! Gus is sick. Now, get along."

Then she saw Cary. He had never known how much heat could be put into gray eyes, before. She gave her chin a little lift and went back into the store. Cary cleared his throat and turned to George Gray Owl, rubbing his hands.

"George, these are the folks who claim they own your land. But the land is really yours, and it runs from the hill back there, where that blasted juniper is, to a point two miles across the creek. Then it cuts east—Well," he said affably, "it's all in the papers I've got here. You've seen the land, and now . . ."

"These folks own land?" George frowned.

"That's what they claim, but my lawyer says they're crazy."

George conferred with his son and daughter-in-law. "We talk to them."

"But it's not necessary! They've got no rights here. I'll take care of them."

Gray Owl went up the steps. Cary bounded ahead of him and knocked gently at the door. Kitty came, a light shape emerging from the cool gloom of the interior. Sam felt ashamed and frustrated. It was a bad mixture with which to face her.

"Kitty, I've got something to explain. Can I come in?"

"No."

"Kitty, look—I'm not a man who likes to work when other people are asleep, but I had to. I—I had your title investigated, and—well, the land really belongs to this man here, George Gray Owl. I'm not trying to do anybody out of anything, and if you want to straighten things out with him, that's fine. But first I'd like to get a lease from him to . . ."

Kitty looked surprised, and from that expression her face went into cordiality, as she looked at the Indians. She knew a few words of Apache, apparently, for she spoke haltingly to Gray Owl, who grinned and made regurgitative sounds in his throat. Kitty opened the screen door and they all

went in. All, that is, except Cary.

He sat on the porch for an hour and a half, smoking, before they reemerged. The squaw carried a bolt of red and white gingham, the grandfather had a big jar of hard candy under each arm, and all the kids had cheap toys. Cary stood there with his big hands hanging.

They passed him without speaking. Cary started after Gray Owl, who turned and looked steadily at him. He said, "Iron Horse kill buffalo. No like Iron Horse. This time me kill Iron Horse."

Cary turned and strode into the trading post. Kitty, at the counter, was reading a paper. She looked up at him. "Well?"

"What did you do with my Indians?"

Kitty couldn't keep the humor from her lips. "I bought them out for twenty-five dollars, some hard candy and a bolt of gingham. I'm sorry," she said, "if I seem to have been working while other people were asleep."

But there was no humor in Sam Cary. He sat on the counter with his hands gripping his knees and stared at the floor. Somewhere he heard a loose, wheezing cough. It made him wince. He sighed heavily and spoke to Kitty without raising his eyes.

"Kitty, I'm sorry about your father. I'm sorry I started to build this damned railroad. But what are we going to do about it?"

"Well, I know what I'm going to do. Stay right here and collect toll. What are you going to do?"

"That's what I don't know yet. If I give up to Sullivan, it'll be the last time I ever boss an iron gang. What would you think of a man who quit when he knew he was in the right and that he'd be retired to the location crew if he did?"

He turned his head and she was looking at him; she frowned; she started to speak and stopped, and then looked quickly away with a shrug. "That's your problem. I didn't start the railroad."

Cary knew he had gained a partial moral victory, because she couldn't answer the question herself. "I used to think C. C. Boone was a stuffed shirt," he told her. "Now I wonder. He must have run into a hundred situations like this one in his time, and he's come through with everything intact but his digestion. That's because he's

got a head. All my head seems to be good for is butting."

He started for the door. "Sam," Kitty said. Cary turned. "You mean you're going back?" she asked. "You're giving up?"

"Did I say that? I mean that I'm going to use the only talent I've got—butting—and see if it's enough to get me through."

THEY were brave words. The tinsel began to rub off them that night as Cary sat in the boarding car smoking his pipe.

C. C. Boone had told him to go ahead only if he had legal authority to do so. He was right, of course: Lawsuits could nibble away at a spur-line's profits until there was nothing left for the stockholders but the gnawed bone of the gross. At the same time, it appeared that the only way he was going to get across Onion Creek was illegally. Even a toehold in legality would have satisfied him, but his losing George Grav Owl to Kitty dynamited any hope he had of that.

Sullivan had his ninety-nine year lease locked in his safe. Shanley said he had imported so many teamsters that a railroad man wasn't safe in town unless he had a dozen friends along. That night Cary slept with the ghost of his former mistress—railroading—and she made mighty cold company.

But there was a good fortification of field-marshal's blood in Sam Cary. In the morning he was ready with a new cannon that might shake the whole mountain country or expire with a wistful pop.

Sam, Shanley and four others pulled out on horseback with surveying equipment. They rode three miles east, to the mouth of Arrovo Seco. This was a possibility for a crossing, though it would take them far out of the way. Yet if they could cut due west within five miles, striking the original line before the country grew too rough, it would be cheaper than abandoning the road.

They returned at sunset, after coming up against a cliff worse than the Central Pacific's Cape Horn. Crossing it would have been more expensive than building fifty miles of railroad.

Sam Cary was licked.

A wind arose after dinner. Cary sat in a chair tilted back against the car, sniffing the evening smells of chili and charcoal fires from the Mexican settlement, and dis-

consolately regarding the mellow squares of the windows of the trading post.

In this mood, he heard someone coming up the slope to the grade. He laid his hand on the Colt which he now wore at his hip. Sullivan and his partner, Mattis, came onto the gravel fifty feet down the track and stood there, not seeing him.

"Do me a favor," Sam said, "and start something."

They turned hastily. Sullivan came up the grade, walking carefully on the ties, Mattis following him. Sullivan put a foot up on a journal box. "Think you can do it?" he asked Cary.

"Do what?"

Mattis had come up, breathing hard. His face, clean and hard as bone, wore a narrow scrutiny. It was a face Sam did not like, too careful, too worried about itself. It was the face of a penny-ante poker player who took his piddling bets seriously.

Sullivan, the blunt, aggressive one, said, "Don't be coy, Sam. I mean the new line you went out to survey. Do you think you can make it?"

Sam said, "No. I still think I'm going to have to tie a can to your tail right here."

"And that's going to be hard to do. In fact, I wouldn't even try," Sullivan smiled and wagged his head. "Sam, we're making things damned tough for ourselves. Making money doesn't have to be this hard, you know."

"It always has, for me."

"You're in the wrong business, then." Sullivan nodded at the car. "Can we talk in there?"

Cary knew what was coming, and he thought steadily a moment before he got up. He did not reply, but led them to the ladder and mounted. In the yellow lamp-light was turbulent testimony of masculine housekeeping. Here Cary worked at his drafting board, slept and sometimes cooked. He made his bed once a week, swept when he began to stumble over the dirt, and had never washed the small windows.

He swung a couple of boxes about and sat on the cot. "Let's have it."

Mattis smiled. "I guess you didn't know I build railroads, too."

"I guess I did. California & Battle Mountain. Gold Hill & Reno."

Mattis looked surprised and pleased. He seemed to consider this a foot in the door;

a lodge handshake. "That's right Seen them?"

Cary shuddered. "I'd rather not see them. I've heard the statistics. Hundred-and-twenty foot grades on the Battle Mountain! Lighter-than-normal ties on Gold Hill."

Mattis tightened his lips. "What's the matter with that? They operate."

"So does a dollar alarm clock. The question is, how loud and how long?"

Sullivan laughed. "Don't let him bother you, Matt. We're all talking about the same road this time, and we'll build it right."

"We?" Sam said.

Sullivan rested his elbows on his knees and meshed his thick, round fingers. "I guess you know by now that you aren't going to build the Safford and Mountain City. I've got crossing rights on the ferry for the next ninety-nine years, and I doubt that you'll give a damn what happens after that."

He paused, and Sam said, "All right, let's have it."

"Well, I got to thinking. Wagons are going to be replaced sooner or later, so why not get a cut on the gravy myself? Between the three of us, we've got all we need to build this one: Matt and I have the capital, Matt's got the savvy to build a road cheap, and you've got the franchise and subsidies."

"You mean C. C. Boone has the franchise."

Sullivan spread his hands. "Let him know he's blocked. You can't do a thing. You've sweated blood, but it just looks like Mr. Boone is hooked, this time. Except that a couple of damn fools up at Gilmer's Ferry are willing to build the road from there to Mountain City themselves. They'll handle all the traffic from the mountain burgs to the junction, and Boone gets the tariff from there on. Could it be sweeter?"

Mattis began to warm up. "Don't get the idea you're being cut out of it, either, Sam. It's worth a lot to us to get the franchise and subsidies. An eighth interest in the net, in fact! And you go right on with the building, because you've got your own stakes down and you know what you want to do with all the cuts and fills."

In Cary's mouth there was a taste as of

having partaken of sawdust. He leaned back on the cot and looked at the smoky ceiling. "You said Mattis knows how to build cheap. What's that mean?"

The men glanced at each other. Mattis gestured. "You can't build a Union Pacific for a proposition like this. We've got to recover our investment quickly, or perhaps not at all. We'll use an oversize mine-rail and—"

Cary waved his hand. "Okay. You can haul the passengers in ore-cars, if you want."

There was a long silence, and then Sullivan said, "Is that your answer?"

Sam said, heavily and slowly, "No. I got C. C. Boone into this, and I guess it's up to me to bail him out. All I wanted out of it was my salary and the credit of having built the road. There'll be no credit in having built this one. It's going to be a seventy-five-mile junkyard. All I want out of it is—out."

He got up and scratched his head in slow and gloomy thought. "The door's right over there, boys. I'll go down and talk to Boone in the morning. I think I can cut it for you. So long."

CHAPTER FIVE

Crisis at Midnight

HE DID some figuring that night, and just before he went to bed he sat down to write a letter. He didn't like writing letters, and this one was hard. It was to Red Mike O'Toole, under whom he had worked before. O'Toole was now in Colorado.

Dear Mike: I hear you're building a big one out of Greeley. I've been in a little different line of work lately but I sure been missing the iron. I thought you might have a spot for me, drafting, dragging chain, almost anything. Or I'll build the damn thing for you if you want. ha-ha! Write to me at Gen'l. Delivery, Stafford, T. A., if you can use me. Your good friend,

Sam Cary.

Your good friend and tie-bucker. Your amateur railroad-builder. Your failure.

He turned out the lamp and undressed. Standing in the doorway in his underwear, he gazed down the hill at the trading post. A light still burned in the rear. The thought

of Kitty came with a little tear at his heart. He thought of her standing in the road that day, the sun in her hair, her hands on her hips, her figure sweet and slender. "I wonder if she'd ever have got used to living in a boxcar . . ." he thought. He realized now she'd been in his plans more than he'd known.

"Goodbye, Kitty," he thought. "Find yourself a nice teamster, but don't marry that mule-loving Sullivan."

He slept heavily. Sometime very late he was aroused by a cry. He sat up, his head still hazy.

"Sam! Are you in there?"

Sam pulled on his pants and padded swiftly to the door. He slid it back and peered out. Kitty stood below him with a lantern in her hand. "Sam. It's Pop! He's awful bad! He wouldn't have a doctor, before, but he's ready now. And now it may be too late to get one."

Sam reached for his shirt from the back of a chair. "Isn't there one in town?"

"There's nobody closer than Safford." Silence closed in. "It's nice, isn't it, treating someone the way we have you, and then having to ask help of him?"

Sam jumped down, a warm glory filling him. "Kitty, if I can do anything to help that old boy out—You see, it was my fault, partly, that he fell in the creek."

He shouted down the line, and Harry Mawson answered. Presently there was a quick flare of coal-oil flame in the cab.

"We'll have steam in a few minutes," Sam said. "He never lets it go clear out." Then he smiled. "I wonder how he'll feel about the iron if—after he pulls out of this?"

"If he doesn't come to you with his hand out, I'll leave him."

It was chilly, and Kitty hugged an afghan about her. He was conscious of her eyes on him. "Sam, did Sullivan come up here to-night?"

"Why—yes. We worked out a little business deal. He and Mattis and Boone are going to be buddies."

"What about Sam Cary?"

"I'm going back to my old job. Oh, I'll have another go at it sometime, but I'll be pretty careful what I'm getting into."

He thought he detected tears in her eyes. "You're big, Sam," she said gently. "You're as big as they come. You'd as

soon fight this out, wouldn't you, only you don't want Boone to lose his money."

Sam was embarrassed. He didn't know what to say, so he scratched his head, and made a sound that even he could not have translated.

Mawson tested his steam. He got a wet-sounding whistle, but his voice came down the grade. "She'll roll, Sam! Where to?"

"Cut everything off but the tender. We're going to Safford for a doctor."

Just before Sam swung aboard the engine, Kitty slipped her arms around his neck and pulled his head down. There was nothing coy about the kiss; it was a warm pressure against his mouth that did something to his heart he had thought only the ring of sledges could do. In a moment she let him go and laughed softly. "Why, Sam, I don't think you've ever kissed a girl before! You didn't squeeze me!"

"You mean like this?" Sam said.

She was breathless this time. "Like that!" she gasped.

The rails creaked under the locomotive as Mawson brought it up. She held his hand as he reached for the grab-iron. "And Sam—hurry, hurry!"

SAM made the trip down in an hour and a half and cut the whiskers off two hours returning. Even so, it was getting light in the east when the abused and creaking engine pulled up outside of Gilmer's Ferry. The doctor was a big man with the loose build of a sheep dog; he paced beside Cary through the cold, pink dawn.

"I had a chance to go into my father's grocery store, in Illinois," he said gloomily. "But I had to get into medicine. Ah, well! Compensations, compensations! One of which," he added, "is not money."

Cary sat on the porch of the trading post for some time. He was feeling more optimistic than he had in some time. He wondered what it cost to support a wife. Two could live cheaper, they said; but he'd always taken a suspicious view of that. And then she might not take to a boarding car, either. And it was all contingent on the old man dying, because she wouldn't leave him, and if you could imagine Gus Gilmer in a boxcar you could imagine Daniel Boone stirring coffee with his little finger stuck out.

But he was fairly sure he hoped the old

boy made it, even if it were going to spoil things for him.

There was a light mist on the creek, and through it the legs of the trestle showed like a line of wading storks. It would have been wonderful to finish the road. *The way he was going to make the Ajo Ravine fill . . . The short tunnel he had planned to hunch through Hollister Ridge. The Cary Ballast.*

Kitty came out. Fatigue had sketched lines under her eyes, but she was smiling and had taken time to pin up her hair. She sat down by him on the steps, wearily.

"Better," she said. "Lots better. It isn't pneumonia, after all. Just a very bad cold, and pleurisy. The pleurisy scared him worse than anything ever has. I don't think he ever had a real pain before."

Cary tried not to sound disappointed. "He's going to make it, then, eh?"

She nodded. "Isn't it wonderful? Oh, by the way," she said, "he wants to see you."

She escorted Cary inside, passed through a living room encumbered with hand-made furniture and entered the bedroom. The doctor was drinking coffee in a rawhide armchair. Gus Gilmer was sitting up, a gaunt scarecrow with his ribs bound tightly with a torn-up sheet.

Gilmer worked his gums for a while. Then he said, as if getting through a distasteful job quickly, "Thanks!"

Cary smiled. "That's what railroads are for."

Gilmer could not help saying, "The stink and the noise are only by-products, eh?"

Kitty said severely, "Pop."

Gilmer fingered the blanket. "I hear you and Sullivan are pardners, now."

"Well, he and Boone are going to be, in a sense."

"Think Boone will like that?"

"No. He'll hate it; but what else can he do?"

"Would you like to finish that road yourself?"

Sam started. Peering into the wrinkled, wasted features, he thought he saw craft and humor. He was not sure about the humor. "You bet I would!" he said.

"All right. Go ahead."

Sam stared at him. "Go ahead! After you've given Sullivan a lease?"

Gilmer grinned with his pink gums. "I

thought you were supposed to be smart, Cary. I gave that lease to Sullivan before I owned the creek. I didn't acquire Onion Creek until you brought Gray Owl up for me! So the lease I gave him is worthless. If you want to write up a new one, I'll sign it for you."

When Cary left a while later, he had a very simple legal instrument tucked into his coat pocket. It was as simple as a trench mortar, and he thought might make as much noise.

CHAPTER SIX

Terminus in Hell

ACROSS the street, at the office of the Mountain Freight Company, two hostlers were reading a team for the morning stage. Freight men were piling crates on the loading dock. Three passengers were waiting with their bags.

The door to Sullivan's office was open. Cary rapped on it and said heartily, "Workin' hard?"

Sullivan jumped a little. Conscience seemed to dwell close to him. Mattis was not there, which was a slight disappointment, but Sam went inside and straddled a chair.

Sullivan was apprehensive. "Going down to see Boone this morning?" he asked.

Cary said, "Maybe."

"Well, you don't want to fool around too long, Sam. We might cut down your share." A chuckle went with it, but still the brown eyes, dominated by ponderous brows, searched Sam's face.

"No. Everything's changed," Sam told him. "I got to thinking, what the hell! I brought the road this far, I might as well go on with it."

Sullivan sat with his hands lying flat on the desk. "Have we got to go through all this again?"

Cary took time to light a cigar. It had the old flavor again. "Have you got that lease?" he inquired.

"In the safe. Where it stays," Sullivan added.

"Well, you might as well light a cigar with it, for all it's worth. Gus Gilmer just gave me one that supersedes it. I'm going down to see Boone this morning, but I'm writing my own speech this time."

Sullivan stared at him and got to his

feet. He walked to the window and looked into the yard, and finally turned back. "All right," he said. "You've got a lease. So have I. We can have a lot of trouble over them, or we can just let things remain the way they are. You're going out of your way to talk yourself out of a lot of money, Cary. With Boone, you make nothing but salary. With us, you cut yourself in for a steady income; maybe for the rest of your life."

"But I'm through with railroad building your way."

"I'll make you a concession. You get the last word on okaying materials. Matt's a good business man, but maybe he does hew a little too close to the line. It'll be a railroad you can brag on."

Sam stood up. "Peddle that to somebody who doesn't know you. I'm building a railroad again, and I don't need your help or anybody else's." He knocked his cigar ash on the freighter's desk. "So long, Abe. I'll have my engineers wave to you as they go by."

Sullivan stood with his hands tucked in his hip pockets as Cary went to the door. If he were beaten, he did not show it. He appeared as solid and humorless as ever, and what he said was significant. "Be sure you don't need my help before you leave here, Sam. Because you won't be coming back."

"I'm going to take a big chance," Cary grinned, "and tell you to go straight to hell."

Outside, the sun was high and warm and he removed his jacket and slung it over his shoulder. The morning stage lurched through the shallow creek and came up the street with shining wet wheels. The driver braked it down and Sam watched the noisy pageant of team-changing, of passengers being checked in on the way-bill and the express messenger stowing bags and parcels in the boot. He saw the doctor coming from the trading post on the run and stepped quickly from the walk to meet the man.

"No hurry, Doc. I'm going down in a few minutes, myself. Get you down in an hour and a half. Take four-five hours in that old-fashioned contraption. And it'll suffocate you."

They walked up the street to have some breakfast before leaving.

CARY had his own car hooked on. The doctor wanted to ride in the engine again, which was convenient because Sam wanted to work. First he tore up the letter he had written to O'Toole and let the wind have the scraps as they swayed and clattered down the gentle grade through a narrow, winding valley. He sat at his desk, then, working on his journal, which he had neglected.

On a clean sheet of paper he noted the main points of his progress so far and what he intended to accomplish within the next thirty days. He affixed the lease from Gilmer and tucked both in his pocket.

Then he opened the front door, admitting a rush of wind and smoke and the hammering rattle of trucks and couplings. He stepped carefully across the rattling vacancy between car and tender and climbed the piled cordwood toward the cab of the engine. And suddenly he seemed to be hurled forward and the cordwood began sliding to the front. He heard Mawson yell something as the brakeshoes grabbed.

Sam fell on the cab floor in a litter of fallen wood. He scrambled up and grabbed a window sill and looked out. They were sliding toward a boulder which had rolled from the bank onto the tracks.

Mawson was snatching at the Johnson bar, but he was far behind. The last thing he did was to shout, "Hang on! We're going to hit!"

When the collision came, the engine shuddered all over and seemed trying to climb the huge chunk of granite. Hot water gurgled in the pipes as it lurched. Iron jangled and every pane of glass in the cab was shattered. The locomotive kept tilting until Sam thought it must fall over backward, but then it began to fall aside. The cab floor was a steep hill they all tried to climb on their hands and knees. Cary saw the tender, and a flat wrenched loose, lumber past.

Then the engine crashed against the bank. There was an explosion in the boiler, and steam began to cloud the road. Sam, Mawson and the doctor landed in the same corner. No one moved for a while. There was comparative quiet, a silence of sorts, a cessation of clamor with only the bubbling of hot water and the hiss of steam.

Cary moved. A sharp pain tore at his chest. Through his shirt he could feel the

cracked ribs. He groaned and dragged himself off the others.

Mawson came out of it. The doctor began to look him over. Cary crawled out onto the sun-warmed ground, and something struck the boiler-jacket with a sharp *spat*.

"I never thought they had the guts for it!" He was not conscious of thinking this, precisely, but it was the total effect of his amazement. Scrambling about, searching for his revolver, he talked to the others.

"We're under fire. Stay down and try to find the guns. There was a .30-30 over each window."

We're under fire. He had lived a rugged life, in many ways, but he had never experienced a moment, before, when someone was consciously trying to kill him. He found his hands fumbling as he located his Colt amid the tumbled cordwood.

"Sam," Mawson whispered. His unshaven face was white. "Sam, I took them 30-30s down last night to clean them. I forgot . . . I mean, we've only got your Colt, now, unless Doc—"

"Which I haven't," the doctor snapped.

"All right, we'll lay low," Cary said. He didn't know how they could have gotten ahead of him, until he recalled the hour he and the doctor had spent in the cafe. And by a direct route a horseman could have reached this point in less than an hour.

HE COULD hear them moving in the brush. The hillside slanted abruptly from the grade, a dry, rocky slope peppered with creosote and scrub cedar. They couldn't know how many men had been on the train, nor how many had been hurt, Sam figured, because they must have left early. So they were coming in cautiously.

They were creeping through the brush a hundred feet away. This motion stopped and abruptly they began to hammer at the cab again. Slugs slapped and sang.

After this there was silence, and then renewed movement that came closer. Cary had an idea that the men were not too eager to hang around long.

Someone shouted—it was Abe Sullivan. "Cary, you'd better come out of there!"

Cary worked the hammer of his Frontier model .45 back and forth, and waited. Some more shooting, and then a prolonged, ach-

ing period of listening. They came on. They spoke low, now.

"There was a lot of steam," Mattis growled. "Must've cooked the engineer. And if the doctor was in that car, he's probably finished, too."

Boots cautiously pressed the gravel of the road-bed. "Wait," Sullivan said. "I'll go around the other side."

Sam came to his knees and placed the barrel of the gun across the window-sill. Sullivan was walking hurriedly down the grade to the front and Mattis was keeping a nervous guard on the cab. So it was Mattis who fired first, an hysterical shot that ranged a yard over Sam's head, and it was Mattis who took Sam's first and second shots.

Cary had always heard a .45 would knock a man down. This one did. Mattis went back a step and sat down, a vacant look on his face and no sign of blood on him. Then he slowly bent forward.

Sullivan was going for the rocks, turning back at the last instant to fire. Sam felt the gun in his hands leap and a light haze of powdersmoke was between him and the other man. When he saw him clearly again, Sullivan was leaning on a rock with one hand while he extended his rifle with the other. There was blood on his shirt. But the shot he fired struck alarmingly close, causing Sam to fire too hastily.

He missed, and wasted his second by an inch, but when he pulled down for the third he saw Sullivan drop his gun and go to his knees. He raised his hand and his voice came brokenly:

"No, Sam! You've—done it. . . ."

It was a couple of days before they finished repairing the track and filling out reports. Sam started for the ferry on a hand-car.

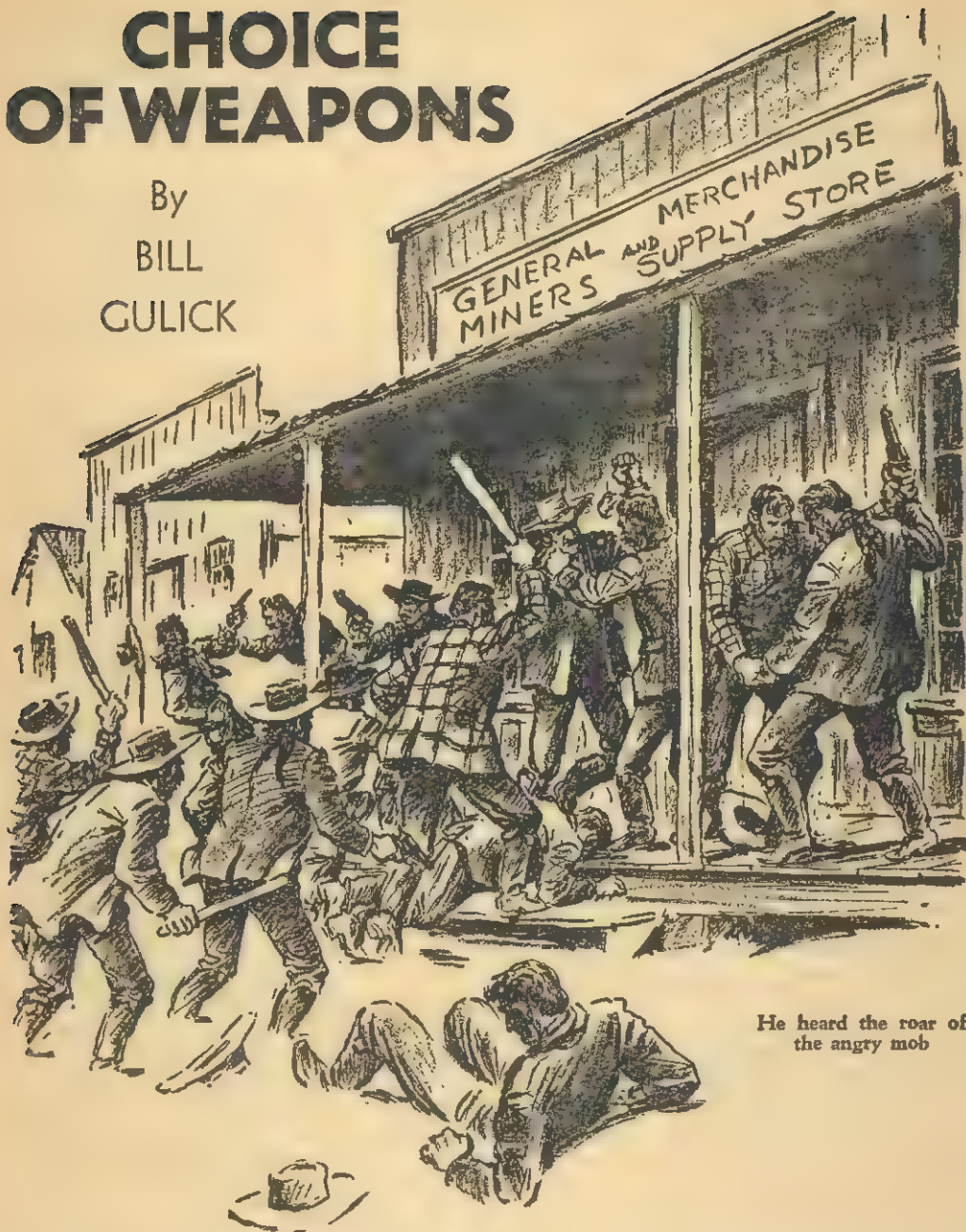
Somehow, after all the turmoil of the last few days, an abstract thing like a railroad seemed less important to Cary. It was still the only way of life, of course, but he perceived some other things of worth, now: Life, for instance. He had a new appreciation of that irreplaceable commodity.

And Kitty: He kept thinking about her, and the way she'd said, *Sam, I'll bet you've never kissed a girl before!*

Sam had an idea she wouldn't dare say it again. . . .

CHOICE OF WEAPONS

By
BILL
GULICK



He heard the roar of
the angry mob

Yankee Trader Barker, the biggest joke ever to hit the tough Orofino gold fields, finally found there's more than one way to skin a cat—or chop a make-believe badman down to size. . . .

"HUMAN nature," Timothy Barker was fond of saying, "is the one thing in this world of uncertainties that a person can always depend upon to be the same."

Barker was the sort of man from whom one might expect such a remark. Tall, spare, with a perpetually thoughtful look

in his eyes, he had the appearance of a New England schoolmaster; which, indeed, was exactly what he had been before his Yankee love for investing a dollar and carefully nursing it into five had brought him to the Pacific Northwest.

That he was a shrewd trader was generally recognized by those with whom he did business, but that the vague generalizations he was so fond of making concerning the human race might have a cash value never occurred to the blunt, hard-headed westerners with whom he came in contact. Which slight oversight was directly responsible for the downfall of Jesse Welch, who loved his little practical joke not wisely but too well.

This was during the time of the gold-madness along the Orofino River in western Idaho. Timothy Barker was not a man to care for soiling his hands grubbing for gold, but when, in late summer, word drifted out to Portland that there were five times as many prospectors in the gold fields as there was food to carry them through the winter, he mused thoughtfully, "If a man could buy up a herd of beef cattle and load a few mules with flour and beans, and if he could get them to Orofino before winter comes, I wouldn't be at all surprised but what he could turn a neat bit of profit."

Buying up five hundred head of fat steers and loading fifty mules with beans, flour, rice and dried fruit, he hired an ill-assorted crew of fifteen men at a small wage and set out on the long journey inland. It was not an easy trek. Mountains, desert and long stretches of almost impassable country lay between Portland and the gold fields, and over the undertaking hung the constant threat of nearing winter, whose first deep snows would mean disaster.

But Barker was a lucky man as well as a shrewd one, and a certain brisk autumn dawn in mid-October found the supply train in the high country only half a day's drive from Orofino. Quietly jubilant over the all but accomplished success of his undertaking, Barker was about to give the crew orders to break camp when a group of a dozen hardcases came riding up. They halted and their leader inquired in a blunt voice, "Who owns this outfit?"

"I do," Barker said.

The man, a bulky, muscular figure with

an ivory-handled .44 holstered on his right hip, swung off his horse, while behind him the rest of the group remained mounted, their eyes flicking about the camp with the grim intentness of men who knew what they had come for. The muscular man gave Barker a long, measuring scrutiny with eyes the shade of cold lava.

"Quite an outfit you got here, Mister—"

"Barker. Timothy Barker."

"Jesse Welch," the man said briefly, without offering to shake hands. "Did you bring this stuff all the way up from Portland?"

"I did."

"Figure on selling it in Orofino?"

"I do."

"How many head of cattle in your herd? What have you got on those mules?"

Barker told him. Welch was silent a moment, his thick lips moving as he made slow, inaudible calculations, then he said, "I'll buy the whole lot. Fifteen thousand dollars."

"I'm afraid," Barker said with a smile and shake of his head, "that your offer is far too low."

"It's more than you'd get in Portland."

"True. But we're a long ways from Portland. I've got nearly that much invested, not to mention wages owing to my drivers."

"I'll pay off the drivers."

"Still not interested."

Welch scowled. "That's my one and only offer. Take it or leave it."

"I think," Barker said, and he was no longer smiling, "that I will leave it. I can do better by opening my own store in Orofino and selling directly to the miners."

Welch eyed him steadily. "There's only one store in Orofino. Mine. There's no room for another. Either you sell to me or you don't sell at all. Is that clear?"

"At your price?"

"At my price."

"And if I don't?"

Welch shrugged. Behind him, the mounted men began to spread out, filtering through the camp and carelessly bringing the carbines which had been held athwart their saddles to bear on the unarmed drivers. Welch grinned and said, "You get the idea?"

Timothy Barker was not a man to be easily frightened, yet at the same time he

was not a fool. One glance at the men in his crew told him that they had no intention of backing him should he choose to fight. For that matter, he had long ago discovered that his talents lay in other fields than that of force. Property, once lost, could be recovered; a man, once dead, was likely to remain dead for a long, long time.

"All right," he said quietly, "I'll sell. Shall we ride into Orofino to draw up the papers?"

Welch's eyes held an amused contempt. "We can close the deal right here and now. Make me out a bill-of-sale for the whole outfit and I'll give you a draft for fifteen thousand on the Orofino bank. Satisfactory?"

"I suppose," Barker murmured with a reluctant nod of his head, "that it will have to be."

TIMOTHY Barker did not believe in crying over spilt milk, but, as he rode on toward Orofino with Jesse Welch's draft for fifteen thousand dollars folded neatly in his inside coat pocket, his Yankee nature was understandably depressed at having been forced to make such a poor bargain. Still, the bargain could have been far worse, he told himself. At least he had recovered his original investment. Orofino being a prosperous, growing community, it was not at all unlikely that a man with a good business head and capital to invest might find all sorts of excellent opportunities.

The town, he saw as he entered it an hour later, was like a dozen other mining settlements he had seen—the same long, dusty main street, the same cluster of unpainted frame buildings, the same unshaven, booted miners clumping along the uneven boardwalks. Feeling thirsty, he left his horse at the tie-rail in front of a saloon with the unoriginal name of the Pay Dirt and went in. Save for the fat, limp-mustached bartender and a lanky, horse-faced customer drinking beer, the saloon was deserted.

"Rye," Barker said, resting a foot on the brass rail.

The bartender set out the drink. Barker tossed him a silver dollar, downed half the drink in a single gulp, then set it down with a somewhat melancholy sigh. The horse-faced man studied him with unconcealed

curiosity. The apron studied him, too. "Just hit town, stranger?"

Barker admitted he had. "From Portland," he added, anticipating the man's next question.

"Kind of late in the year to be staking a claim."

"Mining," said Barker, "is not my line."

"Didn't figure it was, from your clothes. A preacher, maybe?"

Barker amiably shook his head. "A businessman." He finished his drink, offering nothing further to feed the curiosity of the horse-faced man. As he started to leave, he inquired politely, "Could you direct me to the local bank?"

Bartender and customer exchanged glances. "Bank?" the bartender said.

Barker took out the paper Welch had given him. "The Miners and Merchants Bank and Trust. I have a draft on it I would like to cash."

"Draft by who?" the horse-faced man asked.

"Jesse Welch," Barker said with some annoyance. "Perhaps you know him?"

The bartender started to chuckle. The horse-faced man reached out and took the draft and stared at it. "Fifteen thousand dollars!" he exclaimed. "What did you sell him?"

"Some cattle and some—"

The man slapped his thigh, threw back his head and cut loose with a guffaw that rocked the room. "Gosh-all-mighty, what won't Jesse think of next! Say, he's a card, if ever I seen one!"

"The draft," Barker managed to murmur, "is no good?"

"Well, it might be good if there was a bank in Orofino. But—there—ain't—no—bank—!"

The man doubled over in a paroxysm of laughter. For a moment Barker stared at him, hoping that he would choke, then, seeing that unfortunately that was not to happen, he picked up the draft and sadly put it in his pocket.

"You been took, mister," the bartender chortled, shaking his head delightedly. "You been caught, skinned and your hide hung out to dry. Damned if this ain't the best one Jesse Welch has pulled since the time he spiked the lemonade at the preacher's camp-meeting!"

"And you call yourself a businessman!" the horse-faced man roared. "Wait till the town hears about this!"

Evidently, Barker mused, Jesse Welch had something of a reputation as a wit. If there was ever a time when Timothy Barker thought the whole human race was a hopeless mistake, it was when he ran across that strange breed of men called practical jokers. For them and for people who laughed at their pranks—he firmly believed hanging was far too pleasant a death.

"I don't suppose you'll waste any time spreading the word," he snapped, turned on his heel and left the saloon.

Outside, he stood irresolute, wishing for the first time in his life that he were more adept at matters of violence. Half a dozen riders came galloping along the street, dismounted across the way and went into a frame building above which hung the sign: GENERAL MERCHANDISE and MINERS SUPPLY STORE. One of the men, he saw, was Jesse Welch. Grimly he crossed the street and entered the store.

He found Welch with two of his henchmen in a small office in the back of the store. Hearing his step, Welch looked up, recognized him and grinned.

"Well, Barker, you didn't waste any time paying me a call. What can I do for you?"

Barker tossed the draft on the desk. "The joke has gone far enough. I want my goods and my cattle back."

Welch leaned back in his chair, hooking his thumbs in his gun-belt. "Something the matter with my draft? Or ain't the bank open yet?"

"What bank?"

"Fella was telling me the other day that he was planning on opening a bank in Orofino next spring. Hang around. I just might open an account there and then maybe you could cash that draft." The grin widened. "Or maybe you'd rather go to the sheriff and have him arrest me. That'll take a bit of waiting too, 'cause there ain't no sheriff in Orofino."

"You seem to believe in the old adage 'might makes right'."

Welch nodded. Drawing his six-shooter, he put it on the desk within easy reach of his hand, leaned forward and said coldly, "How mighty are you, Mister

Barker?" His grin stretched out a bit.

Timothy Barker gave a weary sigh. The West, he was beginning to learn, was discouragingly full of men who preferred to settle disagreements by drawing guns instead of by reasonable discussion. He had often suspected that such men were sadly lacking in intelligence, else they would depend upon their brains rather than their brawn; still, he had to admit that it was sometimes difficult to marshal a more convincing argument than a drawn six-shooter.

"There seems to be little point in discussing the matter further," he said. "Good day, Mister Welch."

"Wait a minute!" Welch's sharp command made him pause in the doorway and turn around to find the big man eyeing him with a curious, somewhat puzzled gaze.

"Yes?"

"What do you figure on doing?"

"I suppose I'll file on a claim and work it."

"You're no miner."

Barker shrugged. "Perhaps not. But a person must eat."

"Know anything about butchering cattle and running a store?"

"Just about all there is to know," Barker said, with no false modesty.

"I like a man who can take a skinning without whining. How'd you like the job of managing my store for me? Five dollars a day and all the grub you need."

"I'll be paid with drafts on the Orofino bank, I suppose?"

Welch threw back his head and laughed. "Got a sense of humor, too, haven't you?" He took a buckskin sack out of his pocket and pushed it across the desk. "Here, weigh out a week's wages in advance—if you want the job."

From the expressions on the faces of the two gunmen lounging against the wall Barker knew that they regarded Welch's offer as a practical joker's masterpiece. Just wait until they told the rest of the boys! Just wait until the word spread around Orofino that Jesse Welch had skinned a Yankee trader out of fifteen thousand dollars worth of goods and then offered him a job selling those goods in Welch's own store for five dollars a day! The joke of the century, no less!

Timothy Barker, like the rest of his

fellow men, had never particularly enjoyed being laughed at. Yet, after gazing quietly and intently at Jesse Welch for a long while, he nodded and said, "Thank you, Mister Welch—I'll take the job."

OROFINO had its laugh, of course. A long, hearty laugh, for the joke was of the sort that the men in the mining camp enjoyed most. Ben McCabe, fat bartender in the Pay Dirt, told and retold the story with many a chuckle. Harry Hanson, lanky, horse-faced restaurant owner, guffawed until his ribs were sore as he repeated the tale to the town's hotel keeper and the two barbers. Even the quiet, industrious Chinese, who did the camp laundry and worked the less productive claims, joined in the fun with slant-eyed, round-faced smiles.

None of which seemed to bother Barker. He went about managing Jessie Welch's store for him with a tight-lipped Yankee efficiency that, had the circumstances of his arrival in Orofino been different, would have soon earned him the respect of the townspeople, but which now gained him nothing but a greater reputation for being a fool.

He had been in Orofino less than a week and the joke was still in the guffawing stage when Harry Hanson came into the store one morning to buy meat and supplies for his eating house. Ignoring the amused twinkle in the man's eyes, Barker went about filling the order in the quiet manner which was his way, giving Hanson very little satisfaction when the horse-faced man tried to get a rise out of him.

"The town's sure having itself a laugh."

"The town has quite a sense of humor," Barker answered indifferently. Carefully he rechecked the figures on the slip, then said, "That'll be seventy-two dollars and ninety cents."

Hanson frowned, took the bill out of Barker's hand and studied it "Say, you've made a mistake. You've charged me two dollars a pound for meat. I've only been paying a dollar."

"Meat," said Barker, "has gone up."

"What's this—beans twenty cents a pound? I've never paid more than ten."

"Beans," Barker said politely, "have also gone up."

Hanson's face began to grow red. "Look here, who's idea is this, yours or Welch's?

I've always been a good customer and I don't mind paying stiff prices—but I'm not going to stand for highway robbery."

Barker shrugged. Don't jump me. I just work here."

"Where's Welch? I reckon I'll tell him a thing or two!"

Barker inclined his head toward the rear of the store. He watched Hanson go storming off, then, a thoughtful expression on his face, he sauntered to the window and stood gazing out at the street. The weather had turned cold the preceding night and now snow fell steadily out of a low gray sky. Already a blanket of white lay ankle deep on the boardwalks and the falling snow gave all the appearance of having settled down to serious business. By dark, Barker guessed, all trails to the outside would be closed to any kind of travel except by snowshoe. Work on the mining claims would cease and Orofino would dig in for a long, quiet winter. The miners who had made good wages would spend their time drinking and playing cards; those who had been less fortunate would tighten their belts and live as frugally as possible, sustained by their dreams of the bonanza next spring must surely bring.

Barker smiled. Yes, it looked like a long, hard winter; the thought unaccountably pleased him.

Hanson and Welch came out of the office, Welch grinning, Hanson shouting angrily.

"Who owns this store, you or him?"

"I do."

"Then what's the idea jacking up prices?"

"If you don't like it," Welch said with a laugh, "you can always buy someplace else. In Portland, for instance."

Hanson gave an irritated grunt; paid his bill, took his purchases and left. Welch watched Barker carefully sack up the gold dust and put it away, his eyes puzzled.

"Why did you raise prices?"

"It occurred to me," Barker answered, "that we are in for a long hard winter. Men have to eat. Yours is the only store in town. Why shouldn't you charge as much as you can get?"

"Funny you'd be interested in making money for me."

"Nothing funny about it," Barker snapped. "You hired me to run your store

—I intend to run it right. That's all. . . ."

Welch regarded him silently for a moment, then started chuckling, and, as he walked back to his office he was shaking his head in the manner of a man who has just heard a joke so good that he can hardly wait until he has a chance to retell it.

SO NOW, as the snow drifted deeper and deeper over the mountain trails and the prospectors in the shacks along the river began to spend more time drinking and huddling around the stoves in the town's saloons, Orofino had a new joke to laugh at. "Have you heard the latest about Jesse Welch and that Yankee trader? Well, it seems that after Jesse skinned him out of his goods and put him to work managing his store, he got this Yankee so buffaloed that damned if he ain't working his fool head off for Welch. That's a fact! Welch was telling me just this morning that the store is making him more money than it ever has before—and all on account of this damned fool Yankee!"

It was a fine joke, all right, and it made the miners throw back their heads and roar. It made Ben McCabe laugh and it made the blacksmith and the hotel keeper and the two barbers in the town laugh. Even the Chinese smiled a little. But horse-faced Harry Hanson stopped laughing. For business at Hanson's eating house had dropped off considerably since he had had to raise the prices of his meals. The well-to-do prospectors still ate with him, of course, with only now and then a good-natured complaint about the increased cost of a steak, but the not-so-well-off miners began to be seen only twice a day instead of three times, and some of them were no longer seen at all, apparently finding it cheaper to exist on beans and the cheaper cuts of meat purchased directly from the store and cooked over their own makeshift stoves.

This, of course, did not hurt Jesse Welch's business. A blizzard early in November drove the last of the prospectors off their claims and what game there was in the high country froze to death or sought lower altitudes, forcing men who had hunted for their meat to buy it at Welch's store, and this meant more business too. So much business that when Timothy Barker suggested doubling prices again Welch readily agreed.

"Damned if you won't make me rich if you keep this up!" Welch exclaimed.

Barker merely smiled and kept his peace.

Being a man who enjoyed a good laugh, Jesse Welch let pass no opportunity to relate to all and sundry how the shrewdness of the Yankee trader was contributing to his wealth. A few of the well-fixed miners, mellow with whiskey and good food, laughed with him and slapped him on the back and called him a real card. But to Ben McCabe the joke was wearing a bit thin. Somehow he wasn't selling as much whiskey nowadays as he used to. He had never been a man to meditate much on the workings of the laws of economics, but he knew men's hungers: they ate first, drank second. When food was too high, they did not drink at all. So McCabe, like Hanson, quit laughing.

The Chinese, to whom winter was always a grim, hungry time, had long since stopped smiling at the joke, but this was a matter of small account to Jesse Welch. "Damned Chinks," he complained to Barker, "they're all cheapskates. They never buy any meat and they live on half the rice and beans that it takes to keep a white man alive."

Barker meditated upon that remark, then acted accordingly. The next time Ah Ling, a moon-faced, self-effacing laundryman, came into the store to buy his weekly ration of rice, he found himself forced to pay twice the established price. The Oriental bought three pounds instead of his usual five and went away shaking his head in bewilderment. When Welch, who had observed the transaction, asked Barker why he had overcharged the Chinaman, Barker smiled and said, "Didn't you tell me a Chink can live on half of what a white man can?"

"Yeah."

"Then he ought to have to pay twice as much."

"I'll be damned!" Welch said in frank admiration, slapped him heartily on the back and then hurried off to find someone to laugh with him at his latest story of the Yankee trader's shrewdness.

IT MAY have struck Jesse Welch as strange that, save for his own paid gunmen, he found no one in Orofino to chuckle at the joke. Harry Hanson didn't laugh. Neither did Ben McCabe or the hotel keeper or the blacksmith or the two barbers. And

of course the Chinese, who were starving, had no laughter left in them.

Timothy Barker observed these things with quiet satisfaction, smiled and patiently bided his time.

Business at the store was slow the next day. So slow, in fact, that Barker spent most of the morning standing at the front window gazing across the street at the Pay Dirt Saloon where, for some reason, the whole population seemed to be congregating. Toward noon, Welch, who had spent the morning drinking and playing poker with some of his men in the office, came up beside Barker and stared across the street with a scowl.

"What's going on over there?"

Barker shrugged and said that he had no idea.

Welch was about to go back to his game when one of his gunmen, a thick-set, dark man by the name of Morgan, came out of the Pay Dirt, hurried across the street and into the store. "Boss," he blurted, "there's trouble cookin'. They're havin' a miners' meeting."

"Who's been murdered?" Welch demanded.

"Nobody. They're complaining about high prices."

"Who's complainin'?"

"Everybody. Hanson, McCabe, Ah Ling—they're plenty sore, too. They're startin' to elect a committee to come and talk to you."

Welch laughed. "I'll talk to them, all right. Round up the rest of the boys and stand by."

Timothy Barker had often observed a curious fact about human nature: namely, that the less intelligent a man was, the less likely he was to listen to good advice, no matter what its source. That was why he said helpfully, "If I were you, I'd be very careful in handling these people. They could cause trouble."

"Trouble?" Welch snorted. "You mind your business and I'll mind mine. Just watch me handle them."

That, Barker thought to himself, was exactly what he intended to do.

Welch's gunmen left their poker game and their bottles and gathered around him in the front of the store. Across the way, the doors of the Pay Dirt suddenly burst open and men started streaming out, silent,

intent men who walked in a determined manner that made Barker guess they were not in a pleasant mood. By twos and threes and by the dozens they came marching across the street, until there were more than a hundred of them headed for the store.

"Committee, hell!" one of the gunmen muttered uneasily. "The whole damned town is coming to pay a call."

"Men are like cattle," Welch said with a confident smile. "The more there are of them, the easier it is to stampede them."

That, Barker mused, was true—up to a certain point. But even a stampeding herd of cattle could do considerable damage if a person happened to get in its way.

"I don't want that mob tramping through my store," Welch growled. "Come on, we'll go out front and meet 'em."

Outside, Welch's gunmen lined themselves along the boardwalk with their backs to the store front, Welch in the center and Barker standing beside him. The crowd massed itself in the street. In its forefront were Hanson, McCabe and Ah Ling, their faces determined and intent. Welch hooked his thumbs in his gunbelt, grinning down at them with a contempt he made no effort to conceal.

"Hello, boys. What's on your mind?"

McCabe had evidently been elected spokesman for the group, for he stepped forward self-consciously, cleared his throat and demanded, "Is it true that you've started charging Chinese twice what you do white men?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"It just happens I don't like Chinks. Anyhow, it's none of your damned business."

"We're making it our business," McCabe said doggedly. "Another thing. You doubled prices twice in the last month. If you keep on, a lot of us are going to have to get out of Orofino or starve."

An angry murmur of agreement came from the crowd. Welch's eyes swept it contemptuously. "What do you want me to do about it, break down and bawl?"

"We want you to do what's fair and right. Ever since you hired Barker to run your store prices have been going up and up. Maybe that hasn't been all your fault. Maybe Barker talked you into it. But whatever the reason, it's got to stop."

TIMOTHY BARKER sensed that the hostility of the crowd included himself as well as Welch, but, oddly enough, that fact pleased him. It was exactly what he had anticipated. He said uncertainly, "Perhaps I am to blame. I didn't understand—"

"You shut up!" Welch snapped, turning to glare at him. His gaze swept back to the crowd: "Nobody tells me how to run my business."

Mutterings broke out among the crowd. McCabe raised his hand for silence, then said in an angry voice, "That's where you're wrong, Jesse. We're going to give you one more chance to shoot square with us. Either you drop prices back to where they were a month ago or we'll take over your store—lock, stock and barrel."

A heavy silence fell over the assembled crowd. Barker studied Welch's face. He saw the color leave it for a moment and a flicker of uncertainty came to the man's eyes. On either side of him the gunmen shifted their weight nervously and moved their hands closer to their hips as they felt the menace of the mob. This, Timothy Barker thought, was the moment.

"They've got you in a corner, Jesse," he murmured in a voice loud enough to carry to every man in the crowd. "You've got to do what they tell you."

Jesse Welch whirled. "The hell I do!" he roared, and swung a fist.

Timothy Barker had half expected the blow, but even so he was unable to avoid it completely. It caught him on the side of the jaw as he tried to move out of its way, lifted him, drove him clear off the boardwalk and dropped him hard in the street. He lay there stunned. He heard a shot. He heard the roar of an angry mob surging forward, the curses of fighting men, the tinkle of falling glass as the store windows broke. Then the growing darkness of unconsciousness spread over him like a swiftly-rising tide. . . .

It was several hours before he reached the point where he took much interest in things again, and by then, of course, the fight was all over. He found that he had been carried into the store, laid on a counter and covered over with a blanket. Someone helped him sit up. A drink was offered him and he downed it gratefully, then he let his

legs dangle over the counter's edge while he surveyed the store's interior.

"Feel better?" Ben McCabe said.

"I think that I may live," he groaned, "thought you may have to amputate my head." He smiled. "What happened?"

"Not much of anything. One of our boys got a slug through his arm. A couple of Welch's boys—well, we'll bury them when the ground thaws next spring."

"What did you do with Welch?"

"Gave him and the rest of his gang some food and blankets and snowshoes and told them to hit the trail."

"Poor fellows. It's cold weather for traveling." Barker sighed. "Well, maybe they will keep warm laughing at Welch's jokes."

"He wasn't telling jokes the last time I saw him," McCabe grunted. "Look here, do you feel like discussing a little business?"

Barker's headache suddenly vanished. "I'm always ready to discuss business."

"How'd you like to take over the store and run it for us?"

"Us'?"

"For the town. We know that some of the stock is what Welch stole from you. You can have the rest too. We'll let you make a fair profit on what you sell and in turn we'll expect you to sell fair."

Barker said that it was very agreeable.

McCabe and the other citizens in the room shook hands with him, then somebody suggested adjourning to the Pay Dirt for a drink to celebrate.

Timothy Barker begged off on the grounds that he wanted to straighten up the store, but, after the men had gone, he did not go to work immediately. Instead, he got unsteadily to his feet, walked to the front of the store and stood watching the snow sift whitely down through the early winter twilight. A cold wind blew in through the broken windows but he did not feel its chill, for in him was the pleasant glow of warmth that always came to him on those not at all infrequent occasions when his fellow men justified his faith.

Poor Jesse Welch! Perhaps someday he would learn that, despite the fact that men were not above laughing at someone else's misfortune, there were some things which were not laughing matters. One of them was hunger.

FRONTIERSMEN

WHO MADE HISTORY

from the notebook of CEDRIC W. WINDAS



Burt Regan will be remembered in Fallon, Montana, as long as that town exists, for Burt had great pride in his job as marshal, and took it as a personal insult whenever badmen staged a crime.

It was a red letter day for Fallon when "Red" Morrison and "Dutch" Burr robbed the local stage office of a big payroll deposit.



Leaving the transportation company's back door, the bandits raced through the rear entrance of the Drover's Saloon to get to their horses hitched out front.

Regan was quietly talking to the owner when the outlaws ran through the bar. They covered the marshal but he grabbed Burr's gun, seized a bottle of whiskey and broke the badman's skull with it.



"Red" Morrison fired two hasty shots at Regan, but missed, and charged through the batwings to make his getaway. He wasted no time, and was spurring his horse a hundred yards away when the officer appeared in hot pursuit. Mounting Burr's horse, Regan charged after the fleeing outlaw, who turned in his saddle to pour a stream of lead at the lawman.



The chase lasted for three miles. Seeing that he was being gradually overhauled, Morrison left his horse, taking refuge behind some rocks. Regan took Burr's saddle-gun, dismounted, and after a thirty minute battle, killed Morrison. He then rode back to Fallon with the outlaw's body draped over his horse. Recovering the stolen money, he returned it to the stage office.

SET THE RIVER A-FIRE!

By
STEVE HAIL

Eb illustrated with
the toe of his boot
applied to the spot
immediately below
the easterner's coat-
tails



The sidewheeler *Belinda J* was Cap O'Connor's beans and pay, his blood and life, and he'd sure as hell lose her now if he didn't cast off from burning Sacramento town . . . forgetting three hundred women and kids for whom his packet was the last sanctuary from the rushing, hell-hot holocaust!

THE sidewheeler *Belinda* J., mail and express for Sacramento, skidded the bend off Chipps Island with more than usual abandon. Captain Eb O'Connor, standing spraddle-legged and unmoving at a middle window of the pilot house, appeared not to notice. He kept his eyes stubbornly on the first of the up-river reaches opening ahead, as befitted a crack Sacramento pilot.

But John Deasey, the *Belinda's* mate, clucked admonishingly from his place at the big, hand-carved wheel.

"You forgettin' we got Governor Booker's new piano stowed on the boiler deck?" Deasey chided. "After shippin' it this far, more'n half around the world, he'd be more than riled if we was to capsize it now. You got to remember, boy, a favor to the right party now an' again never hurt anyone in this river trade."

"Watch your steering!" Eb snapped. "We got more to worry about than pianos. Or governors, for that matter." He staightened the paddler out for the Rio Vista range and clamped down hard on the unlighted cheroot in his set mouth.

Ordinarily, with the tricky shoals of Suisun Bay left comfortably astern, Eb would have lit up the cigarro and begun time-passing badinage with Deasey. Being part owner of the old but still swift paddler, as well as holder of the state mail contract, he had all the more reason for settling back and enjoying the bottom land scenery flying past the guards. But now his eyes were for the river only and the dead cheroot tasted like peach pits.

Close astern and coming up fast on the final lap of her trial run to the state capital was the cause of Eb's concern. The newly launched *Antelope*, the state-subsidized sternwheeler that was to take over the *Belinda's* mail franchise at the end of the week, was closing the open water between them like her four-legged namesake across close-cropped prairie.

Deasey, unburdened by pilot's pride, loosed his grip on the wheel long enough to glance calculatingly out an after window. He peered over his steel-rimmed spectacles at the pursuing steamer.

"Boy!" he said with grudging admiration. "She's really footin'. I give her room to pass, Eb?" He added without thinking, "You figure Adam Moscrip euch-

ered himself aboard, like he said? He don't pass up any opportunities, that 'un."

Eb bit off the end of his cheroot. He spat over the loo'ard sash, forgetting in his dark mood that the window was closed. "Hold to the middle," he ordered irritably. "Law says she's got to whistle for right o'way. Let her whistle!"

He ignored the reference to Moscrip, holding hopefully to the last that the money-eyed man from the Hudson would fail somehow to make good his boast that he'd outbid any and all comers for the *Antelope's* operating franchise.

A white plume of smoke bannered from the sternwheeler's whistle on the fore side of her stack. The blast echoed back from the low-built levees and rattled the *Belinda's* windows.

Eb grimaced around his clenched cheroot, but he stayed Deasey's hand as the mate reached for the whistle lanyard for an acknowledged toot.

"Maybe she ain't as fast as the state commission thinks," Eb said, although deep inside him he knew better. "It would surprise 'em some, I guess, if the *Belinda* got first tie-up at Rio Vista." He tugged at the engine room pull, signaling William Easter, the engineer, for an extra spurt of speed.

Instead of increased revolutions on the *Belinda's* paddles, Eb got an outraged yelp from the engine room.

"Who you think you're jingle-belling?" Easter bellowed up the speaking tube. "I got the slice-bar lashed across the safety now, tryin' to keep headway on this hooker. You want my b'ilers comin' through your deck?"

"Is insubordination all I get on this run?" Eb barked, affronted. "If I know engineers, you got an extra pound or two up your sleeve. Let me have it, man! We got the *Antelope* tryin' to pass."

THERE was silence for a moment, then the heartening clang of boiler doors. Easter's voice drifted aloft. "Whyn't you say so first place?" he asked in a hurt tone. "Hang on. Here comes your steam!"

The *Belinda's* walking beam picked up a reluctant turn or two. Eb felt the deck tremble perilously beneath his feet as he hurried back to the window.

The *Antelope* didn't appear to step up her rhythm, but Eb had an eye-corner glimpse

of her bow wave curling insolently under the *Belinda's* counter. Then there was a muted jingle from the other pilothouse sounding over and above the thunder of her buckets. Smoke billowed from her towering stack and she seemed to leap ahead. Her whistle blasted once more, demanding-ly. Her wheelhouse drew abreast and only a few feet distant.

A sash clattered downward and a pig-jowled figure adorned in a checkered waistcoat and a black scowl leaned out the window. A fashionable beaver was cocked over brown eyes as tarnished as old pennies, and as hard. A diamond, hazelnut size, flashed in the sun as a fleshy hand aimed a speaking trumpet at Eb O'Connor.

"You understand the signal for an overtaking vessel, Captain?" Adam Moscrip cried truculently. "Or maybe you western river men need a lesson in piloting?"

Eb felt his neck go hot. "Wasn't too sure we was going to be overtook," he shouted back. "Furthermore, you aren't skipperin' that steamboat yet. You're only. . . ."

But the *Antelope* was rushing past then in an effortless display of power, her mammoth stern wheel flinging foam and bottom sand scornfully across the *Belinda's* windows. Her steam calliope, that her builders claimed had been hauled by oxteam clear from Milwaukee, broke into taunting melody.

Eb recognized the tune. *The Girl I Left Behind Me*. But it wasn't the implication of the song so much that set the blood to swelling his ears. It was the fact that the *Antelope* could spare the steam while still making rivals eat her cinders.

"Ring her down, John!" Eb snapped at the mate. "No use shearing off Bill Easter's holding-down bolts. We're licked for sure. The *Belinda's* done."

"Ain't hardly my fault," Deasey protested, rapping out Half Speed to the engineer. "The way you been acting on this passage, a party'd think you was sufferin' from a liver ailment."

"I'm sorry, John," Eb said, cooling down abruptly. "It isn't you I'm irked at. Or the *Belinda*. We've been beat by a better boat and it had to come. None of us can stay young forever. We . . ." He broke off with a tired sigh.

"Shucks," Deasey said contritely, "we'll

make out somehow, even if it means chartering out as a hay barge."

"I know," Eb said. "It's not that so much. It's just that I hate to see a money-fat blowhard like Moscrip get a first class paddler like the *Antelope*. What with the dozen or so rivermen who are entitled to her and—"

Deasey snorted. "A dozen! There's only one deservin' of her, Eb O'Connor. That's you. An' you know it. Ain't the pilot's association backin' you for the job? An' the whole town as well? Ain't you got all the experience and the moral responsibility that the state commerce commission requires? Ain't you got—got—" He stopped, red-faced and sputtering, knowing the answer to his unfinished sentence.

"No," Eb finished for him wearily, "I haven't got the money to buy political influence, even if I wanted to. Or the money to outbid Moscrip, for that matter. You know as well as me that being a state contract it's obliged to go at public auction. Providing the high bidder can fill the other requirements, that is. Evidently Moscrip can. He's had experience back east that ought to more than qualify him."

Eb hooked his heels over the rungs of the backless pilot's stool, letting Deasey con the *Belinda* around Horseshoe Bend that led to Rio Vista five miles farther on. Already the *Antelope's* upper works were out of sight behind the tules, with only a flat streamer of wood smoke tailing aft to mark her progress.

EB SHUT his eyes, not wanting to see it. He saw instead the day, a month past now, when Henry Osborne, the commerce commissioner, had informed him that the *Antelope* was to take over the run. That had been the day, too, when the first thin wedge of doubt had been injected into Eb's hope for the pilot's berth.

"Just a formality of putting in a bid, Cap'n," Osborne had said at first. "The franchise'll pay for itself in six months. You're entitled to it, O'Connor. Nobody in Sacramento'll be bucking you."

He had hesitated then, and added dubiously, "Unless maybe this newcomer, Moscrip. He and the governor seem . . ." He had let the sentence trail off, but the first two fingers of his hand were nestled together significantly.

Eb understood. He had heard the affluent easterner's open bragging that he would control the river within a year. The acquisition of the *Antelope* was only the initial step, but his subtle courting of Booker's favor seemed to assure him of any aid he might need. Eb's face became a mental shrug, thinking about it. He'd leave the politics to those who knew about such things. As for himself, he'd stick to what he knew and hope that. . . .

Eb heard Deasey muttering uneasily to himself. He opened his eyes. The water ahead was fogged with a low-hanging haze that wasn't river mist. And the usually sheltered reach was wind-wrinkled with an off-bow breeze blowing from the south and east. Ahead, the *Antelope* was lost to sight. So was the pile landing that identified Rio Vista. Eb sat erect, suddenly conscious of the unseemly heat of the afternoon, and of the unusual direction of the wind.

There were crowsfeet of worry bracketing Deasey's eyes. "Fire up-river, looks like," he ventured, wiping at his glasses. "Grain fields most likely. Dry as tinder this time of year."

Eb drew a deep breath, savoring the wind. He shook his head. "Woodsmoke," he said anxiously. "And there's not much timber between here and Sacramento. You think—?"

A steam whistle interrupted him, querulous, its source unseen in the smoke ahead.

"The *Antelope*," Eb interpreted the sound. "Feeling her way in for Rio. Better ring her down to Slow, John."

The *Belinda* was a full half hour groping the last three miles to the landing. When finally Eb saw the welcome bulk of wharf sheds through the blanketing smoke, the afternoon seemed like dusk. The sun was an orange halo spreading an eerie twilight over the river.

The *Antelope* was already tied up with doubled lines, Eb saw, with no apparent intentions of carrying on. Eb circled wide to breast the current, kicked the walking beam to half ahead, then backed down full to stop their way, letting the drift nuzzle them gently to the wharf astern of the *Antelope*.

The Rio Vista agent was waiting for them. There was a worried frown on his seamed face. "Word's come down," he informed Eb, "that the whole country east of the capital is afire. Started in the foot-

hill timberlands. This sou'easter's spread it through the brush to the fields. I heard the town itself is threatened. Better tie up, Cap'n, and wait for better news. The *Antelope* ain't chancin' it."

"This isn't the *Antelope*," Eb said. "And we got mail aboard. I'll be getting on."

"An' a piano, don't forget," Deasey broke in.

Eb shot a disapproving glance at his mate.

The agent wagged his head glumly. "Don't know how you'll get through. Smoke's plenty thick up-river."

"So's tule fog," Eb said, "and I've been doing all right in that these last ten years. Cut her loose, John."

The last of the mooring lines were coming aboard when Eb heard a shout from up the dock. The swirling smoke parted from around the running figure of Adam Moscrip.

"Hold on!" the easterner yelled. "I've got business in the capital needs looking after. Can you take a passenger, Captain?"

Eb looked him over coldly. "No way of avoiding it, I guess," he said at last. "The *Belinda*'s a public carrier, in a way. Climb aboard, but stay out of my way. The mate will take your fare."

Eb backed the *Belinda* clear and jingled William Easter for Full Ahead. The buckets bit in and the sidewheeler took off in a smothering cloud of spray.

NIGHT caught up with them four hours later, but there was no darkness. There had been a glowing sunset. Eb recalled, but in the wrong direction. He knew by then that the fire had gotten beyond control. No mere brush fire could spawn such afterglow.

By the time they had felt their way to within short miles of the capital, the fields on either hand were aflame. The heat fanned out across the water before the down-river wind, making breathing an ordeal and raising blisters the size of half dollars on the paddler's paintwork.

Eb stopped the engine, listening for signs of life at where Cutler's landing should be jutting out into the stream. He could see nothing of the shoreline, but a shout answered his whistle blasts.

"Good Lord, Cap O'Connor!" Cutler's voice cried out of the smoke. "What you doin' up here? Sacramento's caught and

burning like a bonfire. You better hightail out while you can."

"Well," Eb said, trying to control his coughing, "if that's the case I guess they'll be needing all the help they can. Better come aboard, Cutler."

"Not me," the other croaked. "I'm chin deep in the cistern. Reckon that's where I'll stay. 'Druther parboil than fry."

Moscrip's voice, thin with panic, floated up from the foredeck. "I'm not going any farther, O'Connor. Either head out of this or put me ashore."

"You paid your passage to Sacramento," Eb said grimly. "That's where you're going. Maybe they can even use the likes of you for fighting fire. That fancy vest of yours should make a fine beating rag." His fingers closed on the bell pull. The *Belinda* gathered way.

Up-stream the wind moderated and by the time they were off Sacramento proper the *Belinda* was creeping in toward the Embarcadero over water like polished ruby. Eb had a bad moment at Chinaman's bar, just short of the turning basin where the channel angled in close to the shore. The heat here was like one of William Easter's boiler hatches left ajar. Falling sparks peppered the paddler's decks.

Eb knew that a vessel delayed here would be a torch within minutes. He called down for full speed and aimed the *Belinda's* jackstaff blindly at where he hoped the channel was. The paddler gathered grudging way, hesitated and touched. She slewed wildly toward the flaming bank. Eb wrenched at the wheel, praying and cursing. The side-wheeler ground sand, struggling for breath-holding seconds. Then with a lurch she sucked free, legging headlong for the obscured dock area ahead. Fear-stricken deckhands came to life to stamp frenziedly at the raining sparks as the *Belinda* raced on.

Eb found himself wondering about that lack of water on the bar. The tide, as he had figured it, was at half flood or better. He . . . But the dock lay ahead then, blotted from sight but identifiable by the high-pitched cries of women and children crowding the waterfront. Eb loosed a series of toots, partly to announce their arrival, but really as an outlet for his relief.

With the *Belinda* snugged to the fender pilings, Eb turned toward the wharf in time to see a grimed figure pushing his way

through the crowd in the direction of the channel. It was only his voice that made Henry Osborne recognizable. Even that showed the effects of heat and exhaustion.

"Never expected you to come through, Captain," the commissioner greeted Eb in a saw-edged voice. "You must have had a time."

"I had," Eb admitted, "but I figured you might need help. I can leave you half my crew before I drop down-river. I'll have to hurry. If the deckhouse ever catches, the *Belinda'll* burn like paper. Her joinerwork is well seasoned."

Osborne coughed, and not entirely from the smoke.

"I'd like to ask you to stand by, Captain. To evacuate the womenfolk and kids in case this gets out of hand." He waved a blistered but eloquent hand toward the town. "If the wind holds off we'll control it. Otherwise, it'll all go—fast. We've got men uptown now rounding up the women and herding them down here. Can you take them aboard?"

EB DIDN'T answer. He was thinking of Deasey's words of a few hours back. With the mail franchise almost certain to go to Moscrip, the *Belinda* herself was their only remaining hope for earning a livelihood. Even if it meant haybarging. But without the *Belinda* they'd be reduced to working for some other owner. And from the way things were shaping up it began to look as if Adam Moscrip would be the only packet owner left to hire out to. Eb didn't think he'd be favored for employment.

He grimaced, thinking about it. The thing to do was get out of here while he still had a chance. He cleared his throat. "Well," he began, "I've got to. . . ."

He paused as the wail of a frightened child rose over and above the distant roar of flames.

"I know," the commissioner said gently. "It's your vessel, Captain, and you're the master. I can't order you to stay."

"No," Eb agreed, "you can't." He let out his breath. He reached for the bell pull then, ringing down a mutiple jingle to William Easter. Finished with Engines. He called out to Deasey, standing by on the foredeck. "Get a gangplank to the dock, John. We'll be staying a while."

Eb descended the pilot house ladder. It wasn't till his feet touched the foredeck that he remembered Adam Moscrip. A skulking figure with coat collar turned up over heavy jowls was lurking in the shadows of the deckhouse waiting for the hands to get the gangway overside. One varnished boot was already on the plank when Eb's fingers reached out, digging into the other's shoulder.

Moscrip spun around. "Let go!" he snarled. "I've got business at the governor's mansion."

Eb tightened his grip. "It'll wait," he said evenly. "Every able-bodied man in town is fighting fire. You'll do the same. Money won't get you out of that."

He raised his voice to Osborne, already striding up the wharf. "Here's a firefighter for you, Mr. Commissioner. Not a volunteer exactly, but able enough, given the proper incentive." Eb illustrated the latter with the toe of his boot applied to the spot immediately below the easterner's coat-tail.

Moscrip leaped, stumbled and sprawled full length at Osborne's feet. The fashionable beaver fell to the dust and rolled over the stringer piece into the channel.

Moscrip scrambled to his feet. "I'll run you off the river for this," he grated at Eb O'Connor. "The governor and I will—"

Osborne's hand closed on his collar, choking off his threats. "That'll wait, too," the commissioner advised him. "Anyhow until tomorrow—providing the town has a tomorrow." He jerked the other around and marched him up the dock toward the fitful light of flames in the near distance.

Presently the first of the town's women-folk began trooping aboard. They were drawn-faced, with babies in their arms or with wide-eyed toddlers tugging at their skirts. They carried clothing and baskets of food, along with trifles and gewgaws snatched up absently in their last panic-stricken moments at home.

Eb watched them streaming across the plank, hope gradually crowding the fear from their eyes. He felt better.

CAPTAIN Eb O'Connor spent a hectic night. There were auger-bored barrels to rig on the upper decks to trickle water down the scorched sides of the house. There was a constant influx of newly arrived refugees to accommodate and be quieted.

There were a hundred maddening details to look after that taxed the *Belinda's* skeleton crew to the limit.

And in the midst of it, John Deasey disappeared. Eb cursed bitterly when the mate's absence was noticed, but there was no time to search for him. He reappeared finally as mysteriously as he had gone, offering no explanations or excuses.

Eb began a scathing rebuke, but in the middle of it a blackened messenger arrived from Osborne advising the *Belinda* to be ready to get underway. A gust of wind had jumped a prepared firebreak and the flames were gaining new footholds.

Eb nodded understanding. He turned away from Deasey in disgust and soon forgot the mate in the preparations for a hurried departure. He posted crewmen with axes at the mooring lines, then mounted to the pilot house and rang a Stand By down to William Easter.

It wasn't until the first ash gray light of dawn dimmed the glow in the east that Eb learned the battle had been won. Only a lowering cloud of smoke, untinted by flame, hung over the far side of the town. Bone-weary men began straggling toward the waterfront and fell red-eyed and exhausted at the river's edge. With them, toward the last, came Henry Osborne.

The commissioner managed a weary smile. "It's all over," he announced thickly. "We've got it licked." His eyes swept across the haggard but relieved faces of the women lining the upper decks: "The people of Sacramento are obliged to you, Captain," he said simply. "If there was anything we menfolk could do—"

"Forget it," Eb said, embarrassed. He motioned to John Deasey to lower away the plank that had been hoisted up in anticipation of their departure. The only thing he asked was the right to earn a living on the river.

The thought reminded Eb that he hadn't heard or seen anything of the oily easterner since he'd left in tow of Osborne some hours back. Eb turned to the commissioner.

"Have you seen anything of Moscrip lately?" he asked in sudden suspicion.

Osborne shook his head. "Lost him in all the excitement. I suppose he's around somewhere. Up at the governor's most likely, making himself out a hero."

Eb grunted and touched a match to the

first cheroot he'd been able to enjoy since their landing here an eternity before. With the cigarro drawing freely his eyes lifted to the women starting to file ashore again. One of them, her face all but hidden in a scarf, stumbled and nearly fell. Eb stepped forward to offer aid.

It was then he caught sight of the varnished boot that had hooked on the hem of the ground-sweeping skirt. Eb reached the figure in a single stride. His hand ripped away the concealing scarf.

Adam Moscrip's brown eyes met his own. They were neither hard nor arrogant now. They were a strange mixture of terror and pleading.

Eb's mouth corners lifted in poorly concealed scorn. His hand drew back, clenching into clubbed knuckles. Moscrip, seeing the gesture, tried to sidestep. He was too late. Eb's fist lashed out in a short, vicious blow that landed flush on the other's fleshy jowls. The man from the Hudson spun, sagged, caught himself and tried to run. His feet tripped on the long skirt and he fell headlong.

A bearded miner, his hair singed and curling over a bellicose jaw, arose to his feet from out of the crowd of men sprawled out on the wharf. He sauntered over to the cowering Moscrip. One huge paw collared the masquerader and jerked him to his feet.

The miner turned to Eb. "Friend o' yours, Cap'n?" he asked.

Ed rubbed his knuckles. "Not hardly." "Because," the miner went on slowly, "if'n he is, you'd best say goodbye. Around this country we hold no truck with cowards who hide with the women. He'll be ridin' a rail out of town, I'm thinkin'. An' the first stagecoach east out of the state." He swung around to the men behind him. "Am I right, boys?"

The menacing growl that went up from the crowd was his answer.

THE steepening rays of a still dimmed sun were washing across the turning basin when Ed O'Connor backed the *Belinda* around and headed out for the down-river channel. He was alone in the pilothouse except for Henry Osborne. The commissioner, bound for San Francisco to enlist aid for the half-burned town, was stretched out on the wheelhouse settee.

Osborne smothered a deep yawn of

weariness. "Well, Captain, looks like this'll be your last trip on the *Belinda*. With Adam Moscrip out of the way you should be taking over your new command."

Eb interrupted to ring the walking beam down to Slow, edging cautiously in toward Chinaman's bar. "Don't hardly expect it," he answered gloomily. "The governor's never had much liking for me. Now that I've gone and unmasked his good friend he'll likely—"

Eb staggered and nearly fell as the *Belinda's* forefoot touched bottom. The side-wheeler lurched, shuddered and stopped dead in the water, her buckets grinding sand. Eb stopped the engine.

"High 'n dry," he said grimly. "I'd swear we were in the channel. I must've miscalculated the tide." He fumbled his notebook out of his pocket and thumbed through the tidal entries. When he looked around at Osborne there were twin lines of puzzlement between his eyes. "Funny," he muttered.

Osborne picked himself up from the deck, rubbing at a bruised hip. "I think we both forgot," he said drily, "that we've had a fire up this way. A big one. This is a backwater channel in here. The heat has lowered the water level considerable." He sighed. "Better back her off, Cap'n, if you can, and we'll get back to the dock. It'll be a tide or two yet before you'll have clearance over the bar." He smiled wryly. "Good thing you didn't try to head out again last night."

Eb thought about the sparks falling on the decks like firebrands, and the nearness of the flaming banks. He thought, too, about how he'd have tried to plough the *Belinda* through at full speed. And how they'd have been wedged here to burn helplessly like a cardboard ship.

There was still a small, weary group gathered along the Embarcadero when the *Belinda* warped in for a landing an hour later. A cold, taciturn figure dressed in a claw-hammer coat and a flat-crowned sombrero pushed his way through the curious throng. Eb recognized Governor Booker.

Booker climbed the pilothouse ladder. He cleared his throat experimentally. "I—ah—I've been informed of your noble gesture last evening, Captain, in standing by to succor the citizenry of our fair capital."

Eb swallowed his surprise. "As it hap-

pened," he said, "it was the other way around. If I had pulled out, the *Belinda'd* be burned to the waterline now."

Booker nodded soberly. "Yes, but you didn't know that at the time. You thought you were gambling the safety of your vessel by staying." He pursed his lips thoughtfully. "I'm not so sure, Captain, I would have had the courage to do the same."

"I'm sure you would," Eb said.

"So? It seems that I lacked the courage of my own convictions when it came to awarding the mail franchise. As you probably know, I favored Adam Moscrip."

"I guessed as much," said Eb coolly.

The governor coughed. "It was a bad mistake in judgment on my part."

He fished an official looking document from his pocket. "I have here the franchise in question. If you'll be good enough to affix your signature, Captain, you can get on with your private arrangements for taking over the *Antelope*."

Eb's jaw hardened. "I want no charity for what I did last night," he said stiffly. "The contract was to go to the highest bidder. I believe Moscrip's figure tops mine."

Booker flushed. "It did," he admitted, "but I'm using the power of my office to nullify it. The agreement, you may recall, specified moral integrity as one of the necessary qualifications of the bidder. After last

night I can hardly imagine Adam Moscrip as a fitting applicant."

John Deasey spoke up from the pilot-house doorway. "Even if he was going to be here to contest it," the mate said.

Eb scowled at Deasey, but grinned in spite of himself. "In that case," he told the governor, "I'll be pleased to sign." He took out a cheroot.

When they were alone, Eb lit up. He regarded John Deasey quizzically. "Funny about the old coot."

"Nothin' funny about it," Deasey said innocently. "It's just a matter of a favor to the right party now and then."

"Go on," Eb invited the other grimly.

"While you were busy last night, I had his piano delivered."

"So," Eb said scathingly, "that's where you were. Now what's that got to do with his sudden change of heart?"

"Well," the mate said, easing away from the malodorous smoke of his superior's cigar, "I calculated that piano must be worth close to five thousand dollars—what with 'round the world freight 'n all. It was worth that in the house, I mean. If it burned, Booker'd collect the insurance. But in the street it wasn't worth a Mexican centavo. I brought that to his attention—while it was still in the street, that is." He grinned. "Guess that's what Moscrip would call the political pressure."



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ONE MAN'S WAR

A Novel

By VAN CORT



Gray hurled him down,
using both hands

CHAPTER ONE

Bushwhack Spoor

Over those bloodied, plundered, unburied bodies Stew Gray vowed he'd find the boss bushwhack butcher whose brand this dirty business bore, even if he had to cross Damnation's borderline into the Kingdom of Broken Men—there to dig and fill his own unmarked grave!

STEWART GRAY lingered between sleep and consciousness as a green and ochre dawn lifted the night's lid on the eastern horizon. A bird twittered in a jackpine on the slope above him.

Even before the shots came Gray's horse was sniffing the air nervously. When the fusillade racketed out in a canyon, almost a mile away to the west, the animal was tearing at the picket line.

A few screams were cut short by staccato rifle fire. The dawn silence came down again. But the echoes of the firing rattled through Gray's mind as he jackknifed to a sitting position, his hand on his pistol. He got to his feet and quieted the horse, shaking the last vestiges of sleep from his brain.

The muffled thunder of hoofs came then

as a band of riders fanned down over the desert floor and traveled rapidly away under a churning dust cloud. Gray broke camp swiftly, saddled and mounted.

When he reached the canyon mouth there was still a feather of dust standing out on the far rim of the desert, but the riders who had made it were gone. The bay squirmed and danced under Gray as he faced it up the canyon. It shied back and he had to apply the rowels. Presently he sat still in the saddle, tightening his lips to keep his stomach steady.

He quickly abandoned the theory of Apaches. There was no sign of mutilation on the five men who sprawled about the overturned Mexican chuckwagon. Their clothes had not been removed, but their pockets had been turned inside out and all saddlebags ransacked. Smoke still wound into the air from the campfire. Saddles and gear lay about and it was evident that the murderers, after having pot-shot their victims, had chased the Mexicans' own cavvy over them and had perhaps ridden over the bodies themselves before leaving.

The dead men wore the clothing of vaqueros of a rich outfit. Their saddles were silver inlaid, the leather beautifully tooled. Suddenly Gray's eyes fell upon the legend on the tailboard of the wagon. He cocked his head and read: *Est. Duarte, Son. M.*

He was out of the saddle instantly, hitching to an alder. His lips moved but made no sound. "Estancia Duarte, Sonora, Mexico," went through his mind. He knew that legend well indeed.

He went from body to body, looked at each hoof-smashed face and chest. He knelt alongside the fourth man and got a little sick to his stomach. "Ramon," he said thickly. "Ramon, *amigo mio*. Ah, *Madre de Dios*..."

He took the body by the shoulders and shook it. "*Habla, habla*..." He finally stopped shaking the body.

There could be no doubt—this was Ramon Duarte. Despite the smashed jawbone and the dust-ground cheeks, he recognized his best friend. There, too, was the jade cameo ring on the left hand.

As he knelt alongside this bloody ruin he recalled the times he had had with Ramon in Mexico. The fiestas, the guitar music, the friendship. The Duartes had

made a second home for him at their estancia.

There was no gold or silver to be found about camp. It must have been a cattle-selling trip then, the men being on their way back south toward the Border when disaster struck at them out of the dawn. Not one of these men had had warning, not one of the ten had as much as made a gesture toward a pistol.

Gray cursed himself for not having followed the fleeing marauders for a clue. Glancing up and down the canyon he saw the ledges where the bushwhackers had waited. The attack had been well planned.

A smashed guitar lay near the fire, one string intact. He reached over and plucked it. Numb with pain, he went about burying Ramon Duarte.

Presently as he once more rode westward along the slope that made the desert's northern edge, his glance, dark and somber, often went to the south, his mind reaching across the Rio Grande. Some day he would have to send or perhaps carry the message to old Don José and Donna Elena. But not yet, not just yet. Right now he followed tracks, tracks that were ground and mixed and often indistinguishable in the rocky soil. But they were tracks.

He followed the sign north into Grant Valley and lost it toward evening. During the afternoon, as he read the spoor, it was obvious that the party, hazing the Mexican cavvy before it, had split up in many directions, hitting grassland and forested range. He sat still in the saddle ten miles south of the town of Grant and tried to draw his deductions. Would the answer lie in Grant valley? Somehow a premonition told him it did. Practical considerations made him shelve the hunt for the present. He was nearly broke. He had come north looking for a job. The one clue that might lead him to Ramon's murderers he kept in a pigeonhole in the back of his mind.

WHEN he rode into Broken Spur the next morning Lou Burdage, the grizzled, tired-looking owner, looked over his recommendations. He glanced up sharply at Gray. "These look pretty good to me." He folded the papers and handed them back. "The odd fact is that I just lost a foreman two days ago. He quit on me. Yes, the job is open and I feel inclined to

take you on. Sure need a man, bad.

Gray was startled. The size of the outfit rocked him back on his heels. At most, he had expected a segundo job. "Right," he said. Then, looking at a bunch of men watching: "I can handle it, and I'll take it, but make one thing clear: Wouldn't your segundo be next in line?"

Burdage eyed him sharply. "Fair enough," he said. "But I'm not moving Tom Pine up. He's better off where he is. No, the saddle is yours, Gray."

They crossed the yard and Burdage introduced him. Pine, a lean, sad-looking, handsome man, didn't offer his hand. He nodded briefly. "Glad to meet you." He turned and walked away. The others looked Gray over skeptically but shook hands. It was obvious that they favored Pine for the job.

Broken Spur was a big, loosely-run outfit. Beef strayed and was not kept tallied too well. There seemed to be considerable losses now and again. Pine worked sullenly, but not too unwillingly with Gray. There was a stubborn loyalty toward the place in the man which Gray had to admire. But the uncertain atmosphere got under his skin. Something was wrong.

A dry-humored, bullet-headed man called Rocky Harris seemed to hit it off with the new boss. After a couple of days, Gray, meeting him by the cavy corral, prodded him, "Rocky, give me the savvy on this segundo business. Why wasn't Pine moved up?"

"He's fixing to get married," Harris said.

"Make sense."

The man's face became noncommittal. "Maybe to the wrong kind girl, in some people's opinion. I reckon Burdage figures a man should stay in his own territory, more or less," Rocky supplied reluctantly. "Maybe he's right."

Gray shrugged and decided to let it ride. Suddenly Rocky said, "Hear the name of Northrup while you been here?"

"Once or twice."

"Well, that's the territory. You remember Curly Bill and his band in old Tombstone? Well, that's Ben Northrup around here, more or less, with a kind of respectable look to it. Ben sort of runs things in Grant Valley. Good friend, maybe; a bad enemy, anyhow. Steals a little beef

now and again, sells us scrubby saddle stock to make into army remounts. We take it and say nothing. You ride with Ben, you vote. If you don't ride along with him, your opinion ain't worth a damn in court or elsewhere. Ben's the fiddler who plays the tune and you pays and likes it."

"Ah," said Gray, "I see now. There's where our stray cattle goes."

"Ben is big," Rocky said. "Don't get fooled into thinking anything else."

"You make me itch to meet the gent," Gray said.

"You will, soon enough," Rocky turned away.

TWO weeks later, except for Rocky's gruff friendliness, and that of another man named Simpson, Stewart Gray still rode a lonesome saddle. Tom Pine did his work; he carried out orders but nothing more.

Gray knew what the crew was up to. They meant to freeze him out, make him sick of the job and quit so that eventually Burdage would let Pine move up where he belonged. They called him by his last name too, another sign of disapproval. He had to smile at this. He was used to taking the long view; he had gone through the army and knew self-control and discipline. And in back of his mind was the clue he was looking for. He had not given up Grant Valley yet.

One day later it hit him right between the eyes.

A bunch of Northrup riders were hazing a herd of about fifty horses into the west pasture. Gray sat on the fence with Rocky and Simpson, looking the stock over. They were mostly scrub, broomtails, fuzzy-coated mustangs with no decent conformation. Most of them had never had saddles on. As the men waved and rode off, Gray said, "What are we supposed to do with that stuff, make army remounts? That Northrup hombre must be crazy."

Rocky winked at him. "That's the story."

"The army would laugh at us. We'll send them back."

Tom Pine was standing a short distance away. He spoke now for the first time to Gray, yet without looking at him. There was contempt in his voice. "In a pig's eye you will."

Gray got off the fence, but Pine did not

stir. Gray walked in among the horses. He could not believe his eyes. That slender stallion with the Arabian neck. Was it Ramon's horse?

There could be no mistake. He had ridden it himself in Sonora. He whistled softly as Ramon Duarte had always done, "Agilar. Agilar!" He saw the animal prick up its ears.

He turned and walked slowly back to the men at the rail. His voice was casual. "We'll take that bay, and the claybank there—that one that looks like some Morgan blood. And the little black stud. Send the rest back. We don't want them."

Rocky looked at him incredulously. "Wait a minute! You don't mean that."

"You're making a mistake," Simpson said. "These horses came from Northrup." They almost sounded as if they felt sorry for him in his ignorance. He saw Pine watch him out of the corner of his eye.

"Get a couple of men together," Gray said sharply. "I said, take them back!"

"All right," Simpson said then. "If that's the way you want it. . . ."

On Saturday Gray was lounging on the gallery of Tolson's store in Grant. Rocky and Simpson were watching him out of the corners of their eyes. It was near noon but the town had not yet come to life.

Pine had gone into the store a few minutes earlier, to talk to his girl, Martha Behan, who worked for Rance Tolson. "Dull day," said Gray, setting down the front legs of his chair. "Let's walk down the street to Emerson's place and find some cold beer." He was half way out of the chair now. "Drink on me."

"Ain't thirsty yet, Gray," said Simpson evenly.

Rocky was shrugging. "The day is long. There's no hurry."

Gray settled back. So they were still playing cool and hard to be friends with? Pine was their Number One when it came down to it. Well, he had lots of patience. And time.

He began noticing that the attention of the two men now and again drifted to a buckskin stallion at a saloon rail directly across the street, and back again to him. It was not a wild stallion, but a stallion nevertheless. It carried a flashy, silver-mounted Brazos saddle. As the beast swung sideways along the rail for a moment Stew-

art Gray caught sight of an N branded neatly across the left hip.

He felt a tightening of muscles all over. He knew now why the two others weren't thirsty just yet. They wanted him to meet Northrup.

Th swing doors at Clark's flapped harshly and a man came out onto the boardwalk and stood squinting against the sun, running his glance keenly up and down the sleepy street before it settled upon the three men on the store porch.

The man's eyes fastened on Gray. He ducked under the rail with an agility worthy of a much lighter man and came striding toward the Broken Spur foreman. He stopped spread-legged outside the store rail, removed the half-smoked cigar from his teeth and pointed at Gray with it.

Simpson and Rocky put the front legs of their chairs down.

"You, Gray," Northrup said.

Gray kept the back of his chair against the clapboard wall and let his legs dangle. "Who're you?" he drawled.

The man winced. "You owe me four hundred dollars. I'll take it now."

"Do tell," said Gray.

"I had a contract with Willis for those horses. No use you sending them back." Northrup's hand came out and he rubbed thumb against forefinger. "Okay, hombre, hand it over."

Gray remained against the wall. He had never had any trouble drawing his crossed left-hip gun in that position. "Yeah, but I had no contract with *you*. Besides, I didn't like the stock. Too scrubby for remounts. Sorry, can't use them."

NORTHROP considered for a moment. It was obvious he had not expected opposition; that he was not used to it. "A contract is a contract. It's nothing to me if you don't like the horses. You owe me the money."

"Willis quit," said Gray flatly, "The contract is not mine. I'm running Broken Spur now."

Northrup considered him, not admitting defeat at all, merely as a general weighing his campaign. He said a little incredulously, "That's the way you want it?"

"Uh-huh," said Gray. "That's the way."

This seemed to amuse Northrup. He put both hands on the rail, leaning on it, drum-

ming his long blunt fingers in some contemplation. "Well," he said at last, "we'll see about that."

It looked as if he was about to pass around the rail and move on up the street when Gray said, "What do you mean, you'll see about that?"

Northrup said, "Just what I say."

In the next moment his one hand left the rail and his tall body vaulted lightly over, to land cat-like and gracefully on the boardwalk in front of Gray. Simpson and Rocky stirred in their chairs and almost got to their feet. To Northrup's disappointment however, Gray hadn't moved an eyelash or a finger. His eyes were on Northrup's guns.

Northrup however carried the move off easily by merely pretending that this was his usual way of gaining the sidewalk. He headed for the store entrance.

But again Gray's voice calmly raked after him, somehow riding the man for having made a near-fool of himself. "Incidentally, I wouldn't do that jumping again in front of me, Northrup. After all, I might get nervous and put a slug in you."

Northrup stopped in the store door and threw back his head and roared; his laughter seemed genuine. "Nearly got you that time, didn't I? Nerves don't take much, hey?" and he went in.

Gray found a cigarette in his pocket and looked at his two men. Both were pale. Gray was about to strike a match when he saw Simpson's glance go to the corner of the gallery.

A voice said, "You put a slug in him—that's a laugh!"

CHAPTER TWO

Honkytonk Trap

A YOUNGSTER of about twenty was leaning against the gallery, a hand on one of his two guns. The weapon was cocked. There was hate in the man's eyes. Gray knew the type. The kid would live to about twenty-three, having killed about half that number of men. Then he'd die quick and be gone and forgotten except by the relatives of those he had killed. His life would have been short, violent and meaningless as the flash of a meteor across the Arizona night sky. Then Gray realized how close Northrup had come to finishing

him. One move of his hand toward his gun as Northrup jumped the rail, and the kid would have shot him.

He sweated a little at the thought, but put a drawl into his voice. "Even a rattler gives warning, sonny," he said.

Immediately after he rose and turned his back upon the other, ignoring him completely, knowing the chance he took. He spoke to the two men: "All right, how about that beer?" The kid brushed rudely past him and entered the store.

Simpson said, "I guess I'm thirsty now." Rocky cast a quick glance toward the store entrance. "What about Tom? He's in there."

"All right," said Gray. "He can find us when he's through talking to his girl."

A glance passed between Simpson and Rocky. "You don't savvy," Rocky said. "Martha used to be Northrup's girl."

Understanding hit Gray then. If Pine had set his cap for a former, or present woman of Northrup's, no wonder Burdage wouldn't give him the ramrod's job. That was asking too much for trouble. Still the segundo's romantic involvements were not Gray's business. He pondered the issue a moment. One thing he knew: The meeting with Northrup had told him that the town, or the valley, for that matter, would never be big enough for the two of them.

He said casually, "Come to think of it, I need a sack of tobacco."

Rocky said, out of the corner of his mouth, "Let's keep our eyes peeled. That trigger-loco Nevada Kid is in there somewhere."

Tolson's was a deep, dark place. A long room ran back from the street, filled with boxes, crates, bolted goods, tools, spices, barreled groceries, clothing hanging in racks from the ceiling. In the back, behind a low counter, stood a dark girl. She was the bookkeeper, Martha Behan, and at the moment Pine's girl. According to Rocky, they expected to marry in a month. She was looking back and forth from Tom to Northrup. She was pale.

Gray stopped at a tobacco case near the entrance and watched the trio out of the corner of his eye. Rocky and Simpson pretended to be looking over some saddle gear. The Nevada Kid was nowhere to be seen.

"Please," the girl was begging, "haven't

I got something to say about this? Tom, why don't you go out of here now, and we can discuss this later?"

Northrup was sitting at ease with one haunch on the counter, grinning. "Yeah, why don't you, Pine?"

Pine scowled at Northrup. "You got no business asking Martha to a party, and you know it. Leave her alone!"

"You better go, Tom," Martha said again.

"That's a laugh," Northrup said. "I got no business asking Martha to a party!" The way he said the word made the implication too obvious. The girl flushed, and Northrup leaned forward. "What do you say, Martha?"

Pine exploded then. His left backhand smashed the big man across the face, wrecking his cigar. His right crashed into Northrup's jaw, knocking him off the counter and staggering him against a shelf of goods. Before the big man could recover Pine was upon him again.

"Stop it. Stop it!" Martha screamed. "For God's sake stop it!"

NORTHROP was on the floor, rolling away. Instinctively the three men's fingers touched gun-butts, Rocky's eyes flitting nervously about, searching for the Nevada Kid.

"Just stand as you are, gents. Don't stir!"

The kid had stepped out from behind a tall box of crated tools near the door, behind them. Two shots came from the floor near the counter. They saw Pine, clutching for his gun, collapse. As he crashed to the floor, his gun clattered dully to the boards.

"No, Tom. No!" Martha Behan ran around the counter and threw herself to the floor beside the fallen man. She looked up at Northrup, who was rising, somewhat pale, yet pretty much composed. He took the trouble to brush the dust from his clothes.

"You've killed him."

"You saw him jump me," Northrup said stiffly. "He was going to boot me in the face."

The three men moved forward. Northrup saw Nevada behind them with his cocked gun. "You too," he said. "You saw him jump me. He went for his gun—

look at it. Just look at the thing!"

Simpson and Rocky grunted. Gray said nothing. "Well, what about it?" Northrup demanded.

Rance Tolson came in from the yard, his face pale. "What happened?" Then he fell silent, seeing Northrup, knowing too well what had happened. The small crowd which had come in from the street, stood at a silent distance. Gray noticed that no lawmen were about.

Northrup jammed the shells from his gun, blew absently through the barrels and inserted two fresh ones. "Well?"

"You provoked him," Gray said. "You seemed hell-bent to provoke him while he was talking to his girl. He jumped you with his fists, but you pulled iron first. Does that satisfy you?"

"It was self-defense," said Nevada. "I saw it."

Gray looked at the girl. There was something attractive and intriguing about her; yet she looked uncertain. Gray wondered how she could have made the switch from Northrup to Pine, two so utterly different men.

Tolson stepped over to Martha and helped her to her feet. "You better come away from here," he said.

Gray turned to Rocky and Simpson. "Let's get out of here and make arrangements for Tom."

As he turned and they followed, he faced Nevada again. He snapped at the gunman, "You're over-doing it, sonny. Don't pull that gun on me a third time."

As the three walked down the street Rocky said, "Never saw a man come right out and ask for it, like you do, Gray. Ben Northrup never was known to let anybody step on his toes."

"Maybe I got toes too," Gray said.

When they reached the courthouse and sheriff's office, Gray said, "You go on down to Meeker's and make arrangements for Tom . . . you were friends of his. I got a little business in here."

Simpson nodded agreement but Rocky put a hand on Gray's arm. "What you aim to do? Make a report?"

"That back there," said Gray, "was murder in my language."

"You're barking at a stone wall. You don't know your way around here; leave it lay."

Gray studied him. "I thought Tom was your friend."

"The cards are stacked, Stewart," Rocky said. "There are other ways."

Gray understood. Rocky and Simpson were just cowboys, men working for hire, after all. It did look like Tom Pine had been asking for it, first taking Northrup's girl from him, then getting into an argument. A lot of men would find it wise to let this ride. But the anger was still in him. "Tom was my segundo," he said. "He was murdered. That's all I know. Go on down to the undertaker's. I'll see you down at Emerson's. He turned on his heel and went inside the building.

Sheriff Sam Baker had a face which revealed nothing. He was dew-lapped like a hound dog, bald, casual. He listened to the report, then nodded.

"Quarrel over a woman, it looks to me like," he said. "Murder? You want him charged with murder?"

"No," said Gray, "You want him charged with murder. You're the sheriff."

"Do tell." The other's calm never ruffled. "That all depends on what comes out at the hearing." Baker made no move to get up and Gray, who stood expectantly by the desk, said. "All right, I'm your witness. I got Rocky and Simpson, too. Maybe Nevada won't have a gun at my back at the hearing."

Baker rocked back in his chair and found a cigar in his breast pocket. He struck a leisurely match and spoke through the fourth puff of smoke. "We want to hear everybody's testimony. All right, I'll let you know when I want you. Glad to have met you."

Involuntarily a bitter smile curved Gray's mouth as he said, "Same here. So long."

What would be Meeker and his assistant walked up toward Tolson's store, one of them carrying a folded stretcher, as Gray left the courthouse. A small crowd of idlers stared at them as they went in. Northrup's buckskin was nowhere to be seen. A deputy sheriff left the side alley by the courthouse and began crossing the wide street at a leisurely pace.

This looked like any other town, Gray thought. People went about their business as if nothing was awry. Yet underneath they all feel the poison of Northrup's domination.

LOU BURDAGE was sitting on the gallery smoking a pipe when the three rode into the yard an hour and a half later. The pipe fell out of his mouth as Rocky spoke to him from the saddle. He got up from his chair. "Well, I warned him," Burdage said at last. "I warned him to stay away from Martha. I wouldn't make him ramrod on account of it. Now I wish the hell I'd fired him. Too bad."

Gray had dismounted and was standing on the gallery step. "Too bad?" he said sharply. "After all, I'm only a stranger here, more or less, but one of your men gets murdered and all you can say is: 'Too bad.'"

There was a moment's silence, then Burdage said, "I'll see to it that he gets a nice send-off."

"To Boothill," said Gray. "That'll do him a lot of good. He was fixing to get married."

"I don't want to knock anybody," Simpson said, "but she's no good. She was the head girl in Ackerman's place till Tom talked her out of that and got her the job at Tolson's, so they could get enough together to get married. She sang, and worked on drink percentages."

"This is neither here nor there," Rocky said. "This ain't the time to tear anybody apart."

"The point is," Burdage said heavily, "you've got to play a man like Northrup softly. You've got to take the long view. He's not the laughing fool that he may sometimes look, Gray. He's got sheriff, judge and jury in his pocket. He's got a little private army of outlaws at his beck and call. He can be a friend, even if he's a tricky friend. But he's a far worse enemy . . ."

He paused and Stewart found the stillness sickening. Burdage went on, "You'll say: 'Just put a slug in him.' Not so easy. He's got Nevada guarding his back. He's got people working for him where you least expect it . . ." Burdage cleared his throat. "In a way, Gray, it would have been better if you had paid him that money and taken all those horses; we could have used some of them, anyhow. Play it soft; bide your time. Some day there'll be an end to men even like Ben Northrup. There always is."

"Sure, wait," Gray said. "While he fills up Boothill? Well, I can't. I'm not built

that way. This whole damned thing stinks!"

"Hold on!" The mild-mannered Burdage's voice was suddenly sharp and overriding. "As I said, Ben knows your every move before you make it. He has friends and allies where you least expect it. The ears have walls. Oh, yes, I could buck him and lose my ranch in a month. I prefer to keep it . . ."

Contempt dripped from each word as Gray said, "You're paying some price, Lou." He saw the man wince. "It's a wonder that even the grass don't grow yellow in this valley."

That did it. He might as well have lashed them across the face with a dog whip.

Burdage's voice was thin. "I hired you, Gray, because I thought you had a long head and a cool temper; because you didn't look like a fool."

"All right," Gray said briskly. "Am I fired? Just say the word and you owe me nothing."

Burdage considered. He bit his lip. "No, Stewart. No, you're not fired."

At the moment Mrs. Burdage stuck her head out of the front door. "It sounds like you men were arguing, Lou. What's it all about?"

"Nothing," Burdage said. "I'll be right in." He gave Gray a look as he turned away. "Take it easy, now." He went in the house.

As Simpson walked across the yard toward the corrals and bunkhouse with Gray and Rocky, he said, "What you aim to do?"

Pine was nothing to Gray; this was not his trouble. But something was working inside him. "Don't know," he heard himself say, "but for me it's war."

He sat at the end of the table as the crew ate supper in silence. Anger and sorrow were on many faces, but not war. They could be right in this thing—that Tom's going after Martha was his own business and not theirs—and bad business, too. They could also conveniently be hiding behind this. Looking at them, Stewart Gray wondered if any of them worked for Northrup.

Half an hour after supper Gray was out in the cavy corral, hunting a fresh horse. As he put the saddle on and cinched, Rocky spoke behind his back, "Thought you had

enough of town for today, Stewart?"

"I guess I don't savvy a burg like Grant, Rocky. I want to see what makes it tick." Gray footed his stirrup.

"Crave company?"

The boss swung into the saddle. "Reck-on not," he said, and rode out of the yard.

Gray's main street was now a black river, with squares and splotches of yellow oil light dotting its shores. Shadows moved in the hazy illumination, shapes of horses and men, noise and laughter rose like waves and washed back and forth, subsiding and picking up again. The rails were full, music from piano and guitar cut sharp and strident patterns in the air. A couple of muffled shots sounded, feet ran hastily and the general town-noise drowned out the rest. A man cursed as he was tossed out on the boardwalk through slapping saloon doors.

Gray sat his horse above all this racket, in the middle of the street. Lamps were still lit at Tolson's; customers coming and going. He thought for a moment of going up there, but saw no point to it. The sign, LIQUOR, GAMES & DANCING called to him from Ackerman's falsefront. It was a big place, with three sets of swing doors.

There was a hush over the place as he entered. The game tables in front were quiet, even the racket at the bar had died. All backs were turned to Gray. All eyes were upon a girl on a low platform in a corner of the room. She was singing a sad song:

*"I went on the prairie to look for my sweet . . .
but he'll never ride no more . . ."*

Even the out-of-tune piano sounded sad. Gray saw many a man chew his lip. Some of the percentage girls sniffled.

The singer was Martha Behan.

WHEN the song was over there was spasmodic clapping, a momentary silence before the little orchestra started up again. Then drinking and gaming resumed. Gray found himself a niche at the end of the bar where he could watch Martha sitting at a table, drinking alone. Joe Ackerman, the proprietor, stopped for a moment, bending over her, speaking urgently. She shook her head and waved him away. It was obvious that she was far from sober.

Disgust welled in Stewart Gray. It had not taken Martha long to quit working in a store and return to the hell-hole she had come from. Men were tough here and without conscience. In another town, Gray thought, men would have spoken louder about getting a rope to hang the man who would drive a girl to this. But not here; this was a wolves' lair and not only their fangs were yellow. Half of them were for Northrup, the others for themselves.

Suddenly he understood why Martha was here. She was throwing it in the face of the town. Northrup had killed her man, and as no man was there to stand up for her, she was bitterly returning to the gutter. A silly gesture, but. . . . He strolled over to her table. "Mind if I sit?"

She shrugged and he sat down. Her eyes were hazy, distant. "I'm sorry about Tom," he said.

The tears came almost automatically, but they stayed behind her lower eyelids. "Don't mention it," she said. "Not sorry enough to pull a gun for him though. . . ."

This hit him, but he said, "A case of being too slow," I guess. "Besides, I didn't know the score. There was a gun in my spine."

She filled her empty glass, moved a stray lock of hair from her face. "S'all right. . . . wasn't your fight anyhow. . . ."

She tossed off the liquor straight. People were staring at them. "You want me to take you out of here. . . . walk you home?" he asked.

"Where's home?" she said. "Here's where I came from. . . . now, with Tom gone. . . ." She shrugged. "I don't want to be alone. . . . do you understand that? Here's noise and people; here's what I'm used to. . . ." He saw her hand tremble. She reached for the bottle again.

He moved it. "Easy," he said softly.

He did not know what he had gotten into. He saw strength and weakness in her face; submission and defiance. She would struggle for betterment, but she would also let fate whip her if it got too hard. "What I can't figger," he said, "is why didn't you and Tom get out of here? Leave this valley?"

"Tom wasn't built that way," she said slowly. "He was a man. He took me from Ben, and he wanted to buck Ben at the same time. He wouldn't run out. Have

another drink." She motioned to the bottle.

As he poured himself another whiskey, she shook her head, staring at the table. "You can't buck Northrup. . . . Tom wanted that ramrod job. . . ." Suddenly she looked straight up at him; tears were brimming her eyes. "Go away, mister, will you; leave me alone."

There was a shrill note to her last words. Gray saw that she was at the breaking point. He took her gently by the arm. "Wait," he said. "You're coming out of here with me."

But at the same moment a man stopped at their table, touching his hatbrim to the girl. "How about another song, Martha?"

The whole room was watching them; the place had filled up with people who wanted to see a dead man's girl sing in Ackerman's Emporium.

"Sure, I'll sing," she said and got waveringly to her feet.

Gray took her by the wrist. "Sit down," he said.

She stared at him for a moment, and he thought that for that instant she was cold sober. "Stay away, cowboy," she said. "I might as well sing as cry. . . . and maybe the game's too fast for you. Stay away." And she shook his hand off and went over to the piano.

The game? he pondered. What was the game? He had been ready to leave, not being able to stomach her apparent toughness; but there had been a glimpse of some unexpected seriousness beneath the drunken behavior.

The pianist bent over the keys. The chords of *I Went On The Prairie* had its effect on the room. Noise subsided once more. She was singing the same song over again. She stood remarkably straight and poised for a drunk, her eyes roaming over the now packed room as she sang.

The mob was fascinated; nothing like this had ever happened before; it were as if they sensed that this was but an overture to some greater event. You could almost feel their collective pulses tick. They did not care what she sang, as long as they could watch and listen.

She had a good voice, and there was that certain something to her which drew a man's attention and held it.

Gray happened to look at the side door, a short distance from the platform. There

stood a vacant table, though the house was overcrowded. As he watched, the door opened and Northrup and two men entered. They walked over quietly and sat down; the two men flanking Northrup.

There was a slight movement behind them and Gray saw the Nevada Kid in the shadow of a waiter cupboard near the kitchen entrance, his impersonal eyes missing little in the room.

Gray could understand Northrup now—and why he was here. This was his table; here he had sat and watched Martha, and applauded her. With the ego of his kind he had taken what she would give, and he himself had given her little more than his time . . . and characteristically, when a real man walked in and saw her, and offered her a better life, Northrup's possessive vanity had been touched to the deadly quick. No one should get away with stealing anything that was his.

IT WAS all in his face, as Gray studied it. There was smugness in Northrup's eyes: She had been beaten; now she was back in the fold, in tough and dirty Ackerman's, where he had kept her and where he felt she belonged. Perhaps there was a tiny doubt and puzzlement at her sordid appearance and singing on the same night as Tom's death; but his ego overrode that. She was here; she had taken her beating. She knew where she belonged.

And in this, Gray knew, the man was a fool. Here was his weak spot; for the woman who stood and sang before this crowd was not beaten. She had pride and determination. But this mob of rats and ghosts of men, and hyenas, would never appreciate that.

She was finishing the last stanza of the last refrain and the audience was preparing to clap. Northrup, with a wide and proud toothy smile, had already lifted his hands . . .

Martha Behan stood elbow high by the upright piano. Her arms dropped gracefully as she turned toward the open piano case; her hands dipped into the realm of strings and lightning-swiftly came up with a slender, small-bore shotgun.

The piano player saw it and ducked for the floor.

But it was so swift and unexpected that not until the weapon swung in its arc to

train on Northrup's chest did people realize that a gun had come out of the instrument.

At that moment Gray, turning slightly in his chair, had his gun in hand and fired. Twice.

The shotgun spun from the girl's hands. Gray rolled from his chair, ducking, as the Nevada Kid, by pure reflex action, fired at him.

That made four shots, racketing and reverberating through the thick air; then the clatter of the shotgun as it fell to the platform and tumbled to the floor. Martha, with stiff, tense hands, screamed in surprise. Someone else screamed in back of the hall; the crowd roared, scrambled, sucked in its breath.

In the ensuing quiet, Stewart got to his feet. The Nevada Kid looked as sheepish as he'd admit himself to look, his attention now on Martha. His eyes had been on Gray all the time. Northrup and the two men were standing by their table, struggling with their surprise.

Martha was staring at Northrup. Suddenly she hid her face in her hands and sobbed. Joe Ackerman came rushing across the floor.

"What the hell is this? What do you mean, Martha? In my place—you get out! Get out of here! Do you hear?" Half his excitement was apology towards Northrup.

Northrup killed the tension then. "Wait a minute, Joe. It's all right, leave her alone." He suddenly roared with laughter. "Why, Martha, sweetie-pie, I never thought you had it in you!"

Quite a few men took up the laugh dutifully. Gray had to admit Northrup knew how to master a situation. As Martha went out toward the back room with Ackerman, Northrup's voice rang out again:

"Set 'em up, boys! The drinks are on me! Everybody to the bar . . . drink to my little tiger lily!"

CHAPTER THREE

When a Woman Speaks

HE WAS first there himself, laughing roaring, redfaced and calm as a cucumber. The crowd surged around him. A moment ago he might have had a hole in his chest that a whiskey bottle could go through, but right now he was laughing

and buying drinks and still master of the town.

For a fleeting second in Stewart Gray there was a weird sort of admiration for the man; then he realized that one of the Nevada Kid's bullets had torn his shirt and plowed across his chest. He turned to the bar. "Give me some bourbon."

As he downed a double slug, someone slapped him hard between the shoulder-blades. He looked into Northrup's laughing eyes. "Nice shootin', hombre! Very neat, very fast. I don't know why you did it, but thanks."

"Think nothing of it," Gray said. "Maybe I figure you'll look prettier with a rope around your neck than a hole in your belly."

Gray said it smiling, and Northrup took it gracefully by roaring with more laughter, but this time he laughed alone. He turned to the Nevada Kid, who stood a distance away. "Where's your eyes?" he said, pointing to Stewart's bloody shirt. "Shooting up the man who saved my life. Have another, Gray."

Nevada shrugged glumly, not grasping the situation.

Gray accepted another slug of whiskey and turned out of the place. He walked outside, swung into the side alley and sought the kitchen door.

"Where's Martha?" he demanded of one of the waiters. The man jerked a thumb toward the stairs.

Upstairs he found Ackerman in the doorway to Martha's room. He was hurrying her packing, cursing her. His little fat, bullet-head glistened with sweat; his hands were gesticulating nervously. "I gave you your job back because I thought you were gonna act decent. Then you pull a trick like this . . . the sooner you get and the farther you travel will sure suit me the better . . ." He was still trembling with realization of Northrup's close escape. "Damn fool, you ever think of what would happen if Ben got killed? Where'd you be? Where'd we all be? Why, Ben is the town. I thought you had some sense; knew where you belonged. Sure you can't go straight, not a girl like you . . ."

Gray had come up, moving on the soft carpet. He tapped Ackerman's shoulder. "All right; I'll take over from here."

Ackerman jumped, then said, "All right

cowboy; you take her; take her out of here, will you?" He turned and hurried downstairs.

Martha looked a wreck as she stared at Gray. But her eyes blazed with fury. "You? What do you want? Why did you do it? Why didn't you let me kill him?"

Gray stepped into the room and let the door shut behind him. "Because if you'd ever sent that load of slugs into him, the Nevada Kid would have killed you in the next instant. As it was, I drew his fire."

The flame in her eyes subsided; she ran her hand over her face. "What's the difference? I don't care. Why should I care?"

"I don't think Tom would have wanted you to die. There's always a reason for living."

"With Tom gone?"

"Who can tell?"

She studied that for a moment, then shrugged. "Have a drink?" She indicated a bottle on the table.

"No," he said. He took the bottle and tossed it through the open window into the alley. "You've got to get out of here."

"Where to?" she asked hopelessly. "There's a stage at six."

"Northrup made a joke of this tonight. He even bought me a drink for saving his life, but he'd never let you get away with it, now you've shown your hand. He'll kill you—or have you killed."

"Unless I kill him first," the woman said.

"You'll never get another chance. Nevada won't be asleep again."

She said bitterly, "You should have minded your own business."

He said evenly, "A bullet's too clean for him. I want to hoist him high."

There was a moment's silence. Then: "I'll turn my back and you put on that other dress there. I'm taking you out to Broken Spur."

"Broken Spur," she said. "That's a joke. Burdage and his wife didn't want Tom to marry me; they wouldn't give him the ramrod job on account of me. They wouldn't have me on the place."

"Do as I tell you," he said sharply. "There's no time. Hurry."

As he turned away she tore off the gaudy dancehall dress and slipped into another, plain one. She washed her face and combed her hair. She picked up a little bag

with her belongings and they walked out.

At the corner of the back alley Gray said, "Wait here till I get my horse. Then we'll go to the livery and get a rig."

He turned back to the street and headed for his horse. A sudden premonition struck him. They had got out of Ackerman's too easily; he should not let her wait, even for a moment. He wheeled, retraced his steps and reached the corner just as Nevada said to Martha, "You're not going anywhere. You think Ben is a complete fool? Turn around and come with me."

Gray drew his gun. The kid obviously had his own six at Martha's back. "Leave me alone, Kid," she said.

"Come quiet," he said. "Ben's orders. You know too damned much. So did Tom."

Suddenly there was a thud, a muffled crash, an oath from the dark. Rocky said softly, "You all right, Martha?"

"Rocky," Gray said. In the next moment he had hold of Martha's arm. He felt her tremble. Rocky was standing over the fallen kid; his gun, barrel-held, was poised for a blow.

"Shall I finish the job?"

"Save him for a rope," Gray said. "We'd have the whole bunch down on us too soon."

"Let's get out of here quick," Rocky said. "I got my horse here by the freight corral. Wait here. I'll get yours."

He was back swiftly, leading Gray's mount. "Don't take no chance on a rig," he said. "You two get out of here. I'll get another at the livery. Figured you craved some company, Stewart. Kept an eye on the kid after you went upstairs to see Martha. . . ." He whistled between his teeth. "Damn it, that was close tonight; you must be loco, Martha."

Gray gave the girl a hand-up, then turned to mount his own horse. As he footed stirrup, Rocky said in his ear: "Not all the grass in the valley grows yellow."

In another moment he had disappeared in the dark.

ROCKY caught them a mile and a half outside town. They had wheeled on the trail and were waiting. Rocky was out of breath when he pulled up. "Had to borrow this horse," he gasped. "While I was at the livery somebody found the kid and

sent the word up the street to look for any Broken Spur men. Thompson got suspicious when I was shy my own horse, so I cut across town and swiped this cayuse from the rail outside Sullivan's."

"Then they figure we're taking Martha to Broken Spur," Gray said. "Baker will make the most of the stolen horse."

"I know a short-cut," Rocky said. "Let's travel."

They cut from the trail and followed Rocky up a narrow hill trail, eventually mounting to a small mesa. There they let their horses blow.

"Martha," Gray said. "What did the kid mean when he said you and Tom knew too much?"

"It's all my fault," she said with difficulty. "I should have known my place . . . should have stayed at Ackerman's. I wish I had never looked at Tom!"

They rode in silence, the girl trying to control her sobbing. "You know how it is," she said suddenly. "I guess I was pretty satisfied with working and singing at Ackerman's . . . I'd never known anything else . . . Then in walks Tom one day. He looked at me and I looked at him. I guess that was the beginning of the end. You know how it is . . . after that I couldn't stand looking at Ben, even if Ben had been nice to me, in his way. . . ."

Silence again. Rocky was embarrassed; he dropped back. "Tom," the girl said suddenly. "He never took anything for granted. He treated me like I had never worked in a dancehall—and I killed him; I killed him, do you hear!"

Gray took hold of her arm. "Easy," he said. "Don't blame yourself." Then he drove almost against his will, the inexorable question at her: "Tell me. What did the kid mean that you and Tom knew too much? I've got to know."

"No," she said. "No, I'm not going to talk. I don't want anybody in trouble again."

"Tell me!" he demanded.

"You're the same as Tom," she said. "You think you can buck Ben, but you can't. Tom wanted something on Ben; he wanted to nail him to the barn door, he said. It can't be done! It can't be done! Ben is too big. Tom wouldn't leave it lay . . . but he should have."

"A man has to do what he thinks has to

be done; you can't change that. I have my reasons for wanting to nail Ben. And now that Tom is gone you should have your reasons too. *Tell me!*"

She looked at him sharply. At last she said, "Yes, I guess you and Tom are cut from the same bunch."

"Well?" he demanded. His pulse hammered at the thought that the clue of Ramon's black stallion might lead to something.

"The kid got drunk one night," she said. "He was bragging, and at the same time I thought something was eating on his conscience. I guess he had to be drunk to find a conscience. We were alone in the back-room of Ackerman's; he was telling me about how Ben used to buy up cattle. The sellers would drive it to Grant and get paid off in cash—always in cash. Then when they were on the backtrail with the money the kid and some of the boys would overtake them at night camp and kill them and take the money back."

"Yes." Gray sucked in his breath. "Ever buy anything from below the Rio Grande?"

"Sure. The kid said it was mostly greasers; they didn't bother him. But white men did. Sometimes . . . he couldn't sleep . . ."

"Nothing but greasers, eh?" Gray's hands trembled. He ran his fingers over his gun. He remembered the evenings on the Duarte estancia, listening to the brilliant conversation of the old Don José . . . and Donna Elena's tenderness as she nursed his wound. Oh, yes, greasers indeed!

"When the kid sobered up the next day," Martha went on, "he wasn't sure how much he'd spilled. He was always watching me after that. When I met Tom he got doubly suspicious. I think he must have told Ben that I had got onto something, for Ben grew suspicious, too. Oh, God, I wish I had never told Tom anything about it!"

"Listen," said Rocky suddenly, directly behind them. "Quiet!"

THEY pulled up as one. Far below, to the east, on the trail, the muffled thunder of a cavalcade went by. "Hitting for Broken Spur," Rocky said. "The kid must have told Ben about you taking Martha there. Anyway, they'll get there before us."

"Just as well . . ." Gray scratched his chin. "We'll take our time and get there

after they're gone. That ought to do it."

"No," Martha said suddenly. "No, I'm not going to Broken Spur. I got nothing against Burdage, even if he was against me and Tom. I don't want him to get in trouble."

"There's no other place," Gray said. "Tom worked for Lou. He should be glad to take you in."

"There's a line cabin where Tom and I used to meet," she said.

"You're not staying in any line cabin." Gray could see the girl going crazy in the dingy cabin where she used to meet the man she loved. "We'll head for Broken Spur when I figure the time is right. Meanwhile, we'll loaf the horses along. Tell me more about the kid's night-riding," he urged her. "What did they do with the horses and saddles?"

"They used to bury the men and their saddles, then chase the horses onto Ben's range. After a while they'd brand-vent them and sell them to trail crews going through. Sometimes to the army. That way the horses were scattered far and wide, for thousands of miles. No one ever knew what became of their masters. They never bothered to bury the Mexicans."

Gray saw it all now. The Nevada Kid had taken a fancy to the black stallion, then Northrup had found the horse too conspicuous and had told him to quit riding it, to get rid of it. Somehow it had got in the bunch that Burdage was to break for the army . . . something like that, anyhow. What an empire, he thought. Buying cattle and killing the seller, getting his money back; stealing horses and selling them to the army; one hand thus washing the other. Ben Northrup strutting around in all this wealth, growing himself an army, keeping the valley in abject awe, buying sheriff and judge . . . the world his oyster.

Till a man like Tom Pine came along, with guts enough to try to tip the cart. He thought about that for a moment. Would he be able to tip the cart?

He saw again in the growing dawn the ghastly spectacle of Ramon's body. . . .

It was past midnight when Gray knocked softly on the kitchen door of Broken Spur ranchhouse.

In a short while Lou Burdage appeared, gun in hand. "Who is it?"

"Gray."

Burdage opened the door wide. After a moment he said, "That Nevada Kid and a couple of men were here."

"Looking for Martha Behan?"

"They walked through my house as if they owned it," said Burdage. "By God, they tramped through my bedrooms, everywhere . . ." The rancher cursed. "Wouldn't take my word. That damned Nevada Kid sitting his horse in the yard yelling that he knew she was in here. I don't know what this valley is coming to . . . a man's own house! Why, damn it! That snot-nosed gunslinger sitting there with a bloody bandage around his head telling me that the girl was in my house . . ."

Gray cut him short. "Lou, that girl is out in the garden, waiting. I brought her—"

"What's that?"

"Listen," said Gray, and he told what had happened at Ackerman's. There was acid flying from his tongue as he finished ". . . That girl has more damned guts than any man in this valley. She's out there now, Lou. She has no place else to go but a line cabin in the hills. Do I take her there, or—"

Burdage thought only for a moment, all the implications of harboring a fugitive from Northrup rushing through his mind. "Why, sure, Gray. Bring—"

"Bring the poor girl in here right away," Mrs. Burdage said behind her husband.

A moment later the two women faced each other in the kitchen. Ma Burdage's stern face had softened. Martha Behan was on the verge of collapse. Instantly Ma Burdage put her arms around her. "You poor kid."

Martha put her head down on the older woman's shoulder and began to cry.

"Bring her upstairs. I'll wake Norah."

Gray stepped forward and picked up the girl. He wondered at how light she was in his arms; this girl, who barely two hours earlier had swung a shotgun against Northrup's chest.

He put her down on a bed in a room at the end of a long upstairs hall and left Ma Burdage and the housekeeper to fuss over her. Lou faced him in the hall. "If Ben finds out she's here, it's war."

"He don't have to find out. Only Rocky knows about her." Stewart Gray bit his lip. "But, hell, for me it's war anyhow. You

know how Northrup makes money with cattle? You know how that black stallion got in that bunch of horses?"

HE THREW these questions at Burdage in anger. "You know how that son Northrup operates—the man you all pay tribute to? You know that, Burdage?!"

Prodded, Burdage said, "What's eating on you, Stewart? What's eating you now?"

And he paled while Gray told him. He was shaken and white when Gray finished: ". . . I'll take you to the canyon and show you where I buried Ramon Duarte. I'll show you where the others lie. There'll be ways of finding where the other murders were committed . . . you've seen the black stud . . . Well, I rode that horse in Sonora two years ago, on the Duarte estancia."

Burdage was leaning against the wall. "I'll pass the word," he said at last and began walking toward the steps with determined tread. "Holy Mother," he breathed, "so that was what poor Tom had up his sleeve . . . and Martha . . ."

He pulled a rifle from the rack in the hall and examined it for shells and action.

Rocky came in the front door. He had chased the borrowed horse away, a quarter mile from the ranch, and then stabled his own and Gray's.

"Anybody see you?" Gray asked.

"Only Simpson. He was at the stable."

Gray turned to Burdage, who was getting ready to go out. "Wait, don't pass the word around. We don't know who works for Ben. This is between me and Ben, and me and that Nevada Kid . . ."

"And me," Rocky said.

"I'll back up whatever play you make," Burdage said.

Gray went out then, and began crossing the yard toward the corrals; in the farthest corral, hidden by brush, he had kept the black stallion. He wanted to make another check and see that it was still there.

He stopped in his tracks and listened; someone was tearing a saddle off the rack by the cavy corral and then moving hastily out along the other corrals, hidden in deep moon shadow. At the corner of the cook shack, Gray shouldered the wall and hastily jerked off his boots, ran in the night after the fading footfalls.

In Agilar's corral a man was frantically slapping a saddle on the little midnight-colored stud, scrambling hard-breathing around after the grunting animal as he tried to close the cinch and tie it. Agilar was excited and protested vigorously.

Gray swung across the poles and landed soundlessly on his stockinged feet. "Simpson," he said, touching the man's shoulder, "what the hell are you doing with the stud?"

Simpson wheeled and lunged, at the same time clawing for his gun. Gray struck then and the man rolled, the stallion springing away with a grunt. Gray danced over and kicked the gun from the other's hand; bent down, picked Simpson up by the shirt front. "Talk man, talk, or I kill you. Talk . . . what do you know about Crow Canyon? What do you know about the black stud?"

Simpson threw his head about and wriggled free. Gray hurled him down, using both hands. Simpson was crawling when the milling horses ran over him at the edge of the corral. When Gray got to him he was still.

Gray heaved the man through the pole fence and afterwards carried him to the stable and dumped him in the feed box. A struck match showed him blood flowing from Simpson's mouth. He went out, after closing the box and crossed the yard to the house. Rocky was in the kitchen having a cup of coffee. Burdage was with him. They looked at the marks of the fight on him as he leaned over the table and poured himself a cup.

"Simpson," he said between gulps, "was taking the black out of here." He swallowed more coffee. "He'll tell no more tales out of school. . . ." He looked at Lou. "Surprised?"

"The reason they were satisfied to ride off, then," said Burdage after a moment, shaking his head, "was that they knew Simpson would bring word to them if Martha showed up here."

Gray went over to the sink, pulled off his shirt and started washing himself with cold water. He straightened suddenly. "Maybe this means that Nevada is waiting for Simpson somewhere. Yes, that must be it. They rode off to give us a chance to arrive here." He snapped his fingers. "Could this be the chance of a lifetime? Maybe

Northrup knows that Martha talked to Tom about the cattle murders . . . and maybe he doesn't. I may have a chance to catch Nevada pretty much alone."

LIGHT was sneaking over the horizon when Gray, riding the black stallion and wearing Simpson's hat, began traversing a large clearing on the trail toward Grant. Approaching the opposite end he reined in the horse and glanced about. Almost immediately there was an owl hoot from under the trees near the trail. Gray answered it, but did not move forward. Instead he beckoned urgently.

As Nevada broke from the brush and came trotting out, Gray deftly pretended to have trouble with Agilar, dancing the animal farther away from cover and thus drawing Nevada with him. It was typical of Nevada to leave his companions behind, for protective cover. From somewhere under those trees, Gray knew, at least two rifles would be picking him up if anything appeared to be happening to the kid.

In the middle of the clearing he pretended to gain control of the horse. Behind him in the three-quarter light, the kid said impatiently, "Well, what's the news? And what the hell's the matter with you and that stud, Simp? Can't you ride? Never gave me no trouble."

Gray wheeled and checked Agilar to a dead stand-still. He raised his head to show the kid his face. His voice was brittle. "All right, kid; maybe here's your chance to show if you're so much better on the straight draw than at shooting sleeping cattle traders in the back."

Nevada's face twitched in surprise, his hand almost jerked, then he considered Gray's position and controlled himself, waiting. "In case you want to try for anything, you're covered."

"Funny," said Gray humorlessly, "but so are you. To *your* men I still look like Simpson, but to mine you're the Nevada Kid. Gives me kind of an edge doesn't it, Kid?"

"You're bluffing," said the other between his teeth.

Gray's voice was almost a drawl. "Try me. Well, what'll it be: A straight case of draw, or a rope around your neck; I sure would like to see you swing, boy."

Talking, he began riding out of the clear-

ing away from the trail. Nevada kept up with him, on his left, but as Gray was a right-handed cross-draw man, he still had the odds even. Nevada was pale and sweating now, he saw, but whether from rage or fear, he did not know. Their distance was twenty yards. Any moment now the kid would go into action, tension and strain kept growing on his face and Gray kept tightening that tension.

"I could hang you in *any* court," he drove at the other, "any court, and you know it. I'm riding on the evidence . . . sure you don't want to take a chance on a draw . . . or has the brave Nevada killer gone yellow?"

Suddenly the kid's two companions snapped the tension by breaking from cover and starting to follow the two men. Immediately Rocky stepped from his cover and threw two rifle shots at them, stepping back again.

They checked at once. As Gray inadvertently glanced to see what was happening, the Nevada Kid rolled from the saddle and drew.

Gray fired from the saddle, missing on his first try. The kid's horse ran clear and left its master standing, a pistol in each hand, blazing away at Gray. "All right, take it, you son."

With an iron grip on the reins of Agilar, Gray fired two more of his own. The renowned Nevada Kid sat down in the bunch grass, cursing and wobbly.

A rifle cracked repeatedly behind Gray, but he kept his eyes on the kid, who was propping his elbow on his knee and trying to fire one gun with two hands.

"Give it up, kid," called Gray. "You're done."

"Never . . . a rope for me . . ." The words came thickly. Then the speaker lay back over in the grass, blood running from his mouth.

Gray knee-hobbled Agilar and walked over to look at the dead man. "Too quick," he said bitterly.

Hoof thunder made him turn to look up at Rocky. Rocky reined in, pale and tight-mouthed; he jerked his head in the direction of the other side of the clearing. "Two more over there," he said grimly.

Gray nodded, "You'll do to ride the river with," he said, gazing at the riderless horses.

He was bending over the kid. "Another change of hat," he said, grimly sardonic, "and this black-and-white-trimmed vest, ought to help me get an interview with Mister Northrup." He poked his fingers through the two bullet holes. "For Ramon," he said quietly. "Now, for Tom."

THEY swung into their saddles and Gray dropped a loop around the dead man's feet and dragged him into the bushes; they did the same with the two others that Rocky had killed, and hazed the horses away. Then they headed back toward Broken Spur.

"Like I said to Lou, Ben will be on the prod when the kid doesn't show up . . . when he suspects that Martha is at the ranch he'll come for her. No use for us to make a wild goose chase looking for Ben. Let him fight on our ground."

They found the ranch peculiarly deserted-looking; the horses were gone from the cavy corral, the front door was barred. No one answered Gray's knocking. "There's an entrance through the cellar," Rocky said nervously. "I happen to know it; something is wrong here."

They came up through a small stair in a kitchen cupboard and in the hall ran into one of Lou's riders. He turned, went for his gun.

"Hold it, it's me," said Gray. "Why didn't you answer? Where's the others? Where's Martha and Ma Burdage?"

"I thought you was Nevada," said Tomlinson. "Ma Burdage and Martha are in a room in the attic."

Passing another man with a rifle on the second floor, Gray left Rocky behind to mount the attic stairs. At the far end, behind boxes and barrels and stored heaps of furniture, was a little room. Ma Burdage and Norah the housekeeper were keeping Martha Behan company. Gray took off the kid's black hat before he entered.

Martha was sitting in an armchair, with a wrapper around her. "That's the kid's vest," she said, paling and staring at the two holes.

Gray nodded. He turned to Ma Burdage, who said, "Lou threw caution to the winds and went spreading the word." Then, grimly, she added, "Should have been spread long ago. He sent the men far and wide. Don't know what results he'll get;

ONE MAN'S WAR

depends on how far the men of this valley will let themselves be crowded. If they'll keep taking from Ben what they've been taking lately, there's no hope."

Gray was about to go downstairs again when Martha got up and grasped his arm at the door. "I want to get out of here," she said. "They won't let me. I don't want to cause more bloodshed. I mean it! I've caused enough trouble. I know just how big Ben is; you can't buck him. If he comes here looking for me it'll be bad."

"Now Martha," Ma Burdage said. Martha's eyes were getting wild again, her hands were shaking.

"I told you this was *my* war," Gray said, gently forcing her back into the chair. "You stay here and don't worry. She needs a drink," he told Ma Burdage. "Better get her some, and some hot water and sugar . . ."

He went downstairs to be met by Rocky at the bottom step. Two men with him were cocking their rifles. Rocky jerked his head toward the tiny windows on each side of the front door.

"Have a look."

Northrup and his two sidekicks were slowly riding into the yard; all around, drifting past outbuildings and corrals, Gray counted twenty Northrup riders. Some were already dismounting, pulling rifles from scabbards. Ben stared at the black stallion standing alone at the house rail. The fact that the ranch was deserted but for this single sign of life, seemed to please him.

"Rocky," said Gray, "go down in the cellar and be ready to sneak out the back way when you see your chance. Try to catch up with Lou and the men; tell 'em to come back here shootin'!"

He turned to the two others. "Go on upstairs to each side of the landing; don't let anybody up them stairs, savvy?"

They nodded grimly. Gray, clad in Nevada's duds, moved toward the front door. Rocky said, "What you aim to do?"

"Make my little play right here. Get on with you, pronto."

Reluctantly Rocky disappeared through the kitchen. Gray walked over and quietly opened the door. Inside it was still dark enough not to give him away when he kept the kid's hat well down over his face.

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Northrup was out of the saddle by now and the two others were dismounting, their hands on their pistols. The rest were distributed about the yard and buildings.

Gray beckoned to Northrup as the latter saw him. He did his best to imitate Nevada's high-pitched voice. "In here, Ben! She's in here!" He turned away from the door and went into the dining room.

His heart stood still; then he heard Northrup's steps on the gallery. "Damn it, Kid, I told you to quit riding that black stud. No use advertising . . ."

Northrup swung into the dining room. "Where the hell did everybody go to? Martha?"

He stopped in mid-speech and saw what the deal was. But it was too late.

Gray was sitting at the end of the long table where Lou Burdage and his wife feasted their crew on holidays. There were bottle and glasses at the other end, near Northrup. A pistol rested near each of Gray's hands.

"Okay, Northrup," Gray said. "This time the drinks are on me."

The two men stood still close behind Northrup, likewise frozen.

The big man laughed then; his wicked blue eyes resting shrewdly on Gray all the while.

"Sure I'll have a drink; to a quick end for you, pal. You don't think you'll get away with this, do you? Honest?"

He tossed the drink off and poured for his two men. They drank stiffly, uncomfortably, their eyes never leaving Gray's guns. Ben leaned on the end of the table, his voice and eyes sharp.

"Where's Nevada?"

"Dead," said Gray. "Shot on the straight draw; not in the back, mind you; in the chest."

The bitter words did hit Northrup but he recovered and almost chuckled. Gray said with contempt, "He was not so fast, Northrup. Not so fast. Oh, yes, and your spy Simpson is dead too. He's lying in the feed box in the stable, right now. The black stud killed him."

THE two men paled, but Northrup smiled benevolently at Gray as he leaned on the table, his hands spread wide. "You still won't get away with this, Gray. One

shot, and my men out there will tear the place apart; we'll level it to the ground..."

"One shot, and you'll never watch them do it, Northrup. You're still the finest piece of noose-bait I ever laid eyes on. You'll swing from the courthouse square before the day is over."

Northrup showed his teeth again. "Do tell?"

In the next moment he heaved the enormous table upright between himself and Gray, and the two men went for their guns.

Gray sidestepped, firing, hitting one man and knocking him down with the shot. Jumping behind the door frame to the living room, he returned the fire which Ben was aiming at him from behind the table top.

The other man darted out into the hall to get at his back through the other living room door. Gray heard a rifle crack from the upstairs landing.

Northrup was firing from behind the oaken slab into the living room. The room was a bedlam of racket and gunsmoke; a racket which was now echoed outside by a slow roar and run of men and voices and occasional shots. Gray shot one of Ben's guns out of his hand.

There was a lull. Gray sprang to the hall and shot down the first man who appeared in the front door. Ben was turning upon him in the dining room, his left hand bleeding and empty. The two men had a moment then, of facing each other, their guns poised for a final, sure shot.

Northrup's bullet went through Gray's upper left arm as Gray sent a slug into the other's right shoulder. Staggering back against the hall wall he saw Northrup spin halfway around, the gun falling. He was trying to make his way through the kitchen when Gray caught him, spun him around and floored him with a blow. "You're still noose-bait, my friend."

He ran to the front door then, but no stream of men pounded through it. Instead, the steady cracking of rifle fire sounded from the periphery of the ranch area. Several Northrup men were down, others scrambled for their horses. Tomlinson was firing from the gallery and the gun of the other man blazed from an upstairs window.

As the yard eventually filled with men,

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DIME WESTERN MAGAZINE

led by Lou Burdage and Rocky, Stewart Gray had dragged Northrup out through the front door.

"Let's take him to Grant and hoist him," he said. "Let's finish this, once and for all!"

There could be no argument; and that was what was done. Two hours later Northrup stood on a tailboard of a wagon under the pole gate to Decker's corral across from the small courthouse. He looked over his domain for the last time, somehow hardly believing that this was the end. Gray saw no fear, only disbelief in the man's eyes. Rocky was tying the hang-rope, and there were no ready outlaw riders to rescue him, no sheriff to stop it. Baker, reading the signs, was making tracks.

Northrup gave a last laugh as he looked at Gray. "Should have plugged you the first time. I should have known you for what you was." He laughed again. "Well, my mistake . . . I'll never make that again. Won't get the chance."

The laugh faded, his face tightened. "Well, what're you waiting for? I'll be late for breakfast . . ."

Rocky gave the horse a swift rap and the tailboard vanished from under Ben's feet. "That's for Tom," Rocky whispered between his teeth.

* * *

Upon return to Broken Spur they learned that Martha had vanished. "I wish I had watched better," complained Ma Burdage, "but she must have sneaked out in the confusion and got one of the Northrup horses. She didn't know what she was doing."

Stewart Gray hit the trail the next day. He traced her to the stage junction in Enderby. It took him two months. But one night in Silver City as he brushed through the swing doors, he heard:

"I went on the prairie to look for my sweet . . ."

But he'll never ride no more . . ."

He went over to her table when she was through with the song. "Let me take you home . . ."

After a moment she got up and put her hand in his. He liked it there, as they walked through the darkness. . . .

THE END